South Haven Tribune

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October 19, 2025

Brown, Hosley face off for SH mayoral race

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The general election for the South Haven mayoral race is just around the corner.

There are two candidates vying for the two-year term for mayor, which includes incumbent Annie Brown and Council Member Mary Hosley.

Getting the job done

Mayor Annie Brown, 64, has lived in South Haven since 1985, but is originally from Hillman, Mich.

She has served on the housing commission and the parks commission. She is on the board of the South Haven Area Emergency Services, is the secretary on the Van Buren County Senior Services board and is also vice president of the United Christian Services of Van Buren County.

Brown said she is running for reelection as mayor because she wants to continue expanding on the projects that started during her time as mayor.

"I am running for mayor again because we made progress in my first two years of mayor and we are marching forward with a lot more projects that we have started," she said. "There's much to do on the horizon and I feel like I've built some good relationships

BROWN

HOSLEY

with groups in the city; with the South Haven Township board and I'm looking forward to expanding the work we've done and marching forward to my second term."

If reelected, Brown said she wants to focus on housing in the city.

"I am always continually passionate about housing," Brown said. "I just heard yesterday that a year ago there were 105 unhoused students in the South Haven school district in the 2024-25 school year. That's a huge sign that we need to increase our housing, not just for teachers and firefighters, but also for our families who are unhoused."

She said she wants to also continue working on the city's infrastructure.

"This year, we had $42 billion invested in wastewater and drinking water infrastructure," Brown said. "On the horizon, we have a big project that is the regional connection of a wastewater treatment system with Covert Township, Holtec, the Van Buren State Park and the city of South Haven. These are big projects that are on the horizon that I am looking forward to working on."

Brown said she is hoping to see teamwork, integrity and civility with the future city council.

"When I am going door to door in South Haven, I ask people what do you want in South Haven? And they say more civility at meetings," she said. "That is such a distraction and with all that quibbling and bickering going on, it's hard to focus on what our job really is as council persons. I'm looking forward to new members who are trained, who are experienced, who have lived in South Haven for a long time, so they know the culture of South Haven and South Haven values and we can work together and get the job done."

Choosing a new path

Mary Hosley, 62, grew up in Lowell, but currently lives in South Haven.

She serves on the city council and is the council's liaison to the planning commission and airport authority. She has previously served on the brownfield redevelopment authority and the downtown finance authority.

Hosley said she is running for mayor because she wants to bring transparency, fairness and accountability to the council and the city.

See MAYOR, page A2

FIRE SAFETY FUN NIGHT

Photo provided / Tom Renner

South Haven Area Emergency Services hosted the 18th annual Fire Safety Fun Night, which included live demonstrations, hands-on training and prizes.

Four candidates vie for two SH council seats

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — Four candidates are vying for two seats on the South Haven City Council in the Nov. 4 election.

The city council candidates include Lisa Krupiarz and Eddie Polk for Ward 1 and Thomas Capps and Todd Heinrich for Ward 2. Both seats carry four-year terms. Dave Flack is running uncontested for the Ward 3 seat. All candidates are running as non-partisans.

Lisa Krupiarz, 71, currently lives in South Haven, but grew up in Dearborn. She currently serves as an alternate on the zoning board of appeals.

Krupiarz said she decided to run for office after attending various city council, parks commission and zoning board meetings for the

KRUPIARZ

CAPPS

HEINRICH

last four years.

"I'm very engaged and informed on the city issues," Krupiarz said. "There was a group of us that were kind of looking for candidates that would be resident-focused and be able to continue our initiatives. In that effort, I was looking through Ward 1, talking to people and seeing if people were interested, people that I thought were more qualified than me and everybody said "no." So, finally it got to be where, well, if nobody's going to do it, I might as well do it."

If elected, she said her initiatives are the same as the city.

"The short-term rental ordinance ... the thing that really needs to happen with short-term rentals, we've got well-written ordinances, but they are not enforced, or they are not enforced as well as they should be," she said.

Krupiarz said economic development in the city doesn't seem to make any progress.

"We work with Market One Van Buren and Jim Hinger and we just seem to not get anywhere, where people would like to have jobs here so that they could be employed here, even though there is really no affordable housing," she said.

She said her other initiatives focus on affordable housing and lifeguards.

"We seem to know about these things, but nothing ever seems to happen to improve the situation which is very discouraging," Krupiarz said. "I'm not saying that I have the answer to everything, but I really would like to get into these topics: the economic development and this middle-income housing and see if we can work ... whatever we have to do to make these things happen. Then the fourth thing is the lifeguard program. I think that beach safety is a huge issue, not only for tourism, but also for residents."

Thomas Capps, 68, is a fourth-generation resident of South Haven.

Capps said he is running for city council because he wants to give back to the community.

"I'm a lifelong resident

See COUNCIL, page A2

SH school board approves armory demolition bid

High school gets new principal, audit approved by board

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven school board has accepted a demolition bid for the Michigan State Armory renovation project.

Director of Non-Instructional Services Kevin Dee and Ross Kruithof from GDK Construction gave an update on the project during Wednesday night's school board meeting. Dee said they are currently $40,000 under budget for the entire project.

The demolition bid is one of 24 bid categories that are required for this project. Dee said they have received 80 bids, including the demolition bid for $99,300.

The rest of the bids will be finalized and brought to the board during next month's meeting. With the bid approval, Dee said demolition can begin as early as November.

The building is set to be repurposed and used as administration and transportation offices. Included in the plans will be a fenced-in parking lot for the buses, maintenance bays for the buses, storage and offices.

The armory was built in 1923 and bought by the district around 2011.

Annual audit

The board approved the annual audit report for the 2024-25 year.

Sherrie Blankenship, partner of Maner Costerisan, presented a brief report of the district's annual audit. Blankenship highlighted the GASB Standards that were adopted for the year, which changes how the liability for compensation absences is recognized and measured.

For the government-wide net position there was $10.1 million refunding bonds issued and debt principal payments of $2.3 million.

In the general fund, revenue and other sources was budgeted at $25,489,040 and the actual revenue came out to $25,650,748 with a 0.63 percent variance.

Expenditures and other uses in the general fund was budgeted at $25,684,007 and the actual expenditures came out to $25,176,081 with a 1.98 percent variance.

The general fund expenditures include 59 percent instruction and 41 percent supporting services.

Other items

Superintendent Ana Aleman-Putman announced during the meeting that Amy Cockburn has been hired as the new principal of South Haven High School.

She also announced that five new bus drivers are currently in training or about to start training to help fix the current bus driver shortage.

South Haven High School student Tristen Blunt was chosen for this month's student pride awards. The staff pride award was given to Shawn Vigansky who is a custodian at Maple Grove Elementary School.

Pride awards are presented once a month during the school board meetings to at least one South Haven student and staff member. Pride awards are a tradition the school has done for more than 12 years to honor those who have shown excellence in academics and character.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

The Tribune: Celebrating Our 126th Year

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Moving South Haven forward

Dear editor,

South Haven is a small town and I want to believe we all have similar visions – planned growth and opportunity, vibrancy and a sense of community.

My husband and I moved here full-time five years ago to experience a sense of peace, friendship and safety. My family has been coming to South Haven since the 1930s. For me it was like a second home.

It saddens me to witness the divide the upcoming elections have triggered. We have a right to our opinions ... but the nastiness is unacceptable and has to stop. I want our mayor and council members to be transparent, honest and approachable. That is why I am fully supporting Annie Brown for mayor.

Annie has the experience and passion I want in a leader. The past two years have been nothing but fighting, game playing and opposition by certain council members. Annie has not been given a chance to fulfill her mayoral campaign promises and vision. Annie Brown deserves an opportunity to finally help South Haven move forward.

That is why I am asking you to vote for Annie Brown, Tom Capps, Eddie Polk and Dave Flack. Let's stop the fighting. Let's get back to civility. Let's get back to moving South Haven forward! Vote for Annie Brown, mayor!

Robin McGinnis
South Haven

Back on track

Dear editor,

As we approach the November election, it's remarkable to see how our vibrant downtown continues to thrive – shops, restaurants, parks and marinas bustling with life. South Haven has truly become a year-round destination, welcoming visitors from across the region who come for our natural beauty and warm spirit.

For local businesses, these final months before winter are vital. Let's continue to support them by shopping local, dining out and engaging with the small businesses that define our community.

Yet, while we celebrate our successes, we must also confront our challenges. Over the past two years, city council has been consumed by a single issue, leaving other priorities behind. This narrow focus has divided our community and distracted from the broader needs of our residents and businesses.

Now, with the reopening of the Palisades Nuclear Plant, we have a rare opportunity to attract new families and strengthen our schools, housing and economy. But without strong, forward-thinking leadership, we risk letting this moment pass us by.

It's time for change. South Haven needs leaders who are proactive, inclusive and focused on real solutions. That's why I'm supporting Annie Brown for mayor, Eddie Polk for Ward 1, Tom Capps for Ward 2, and David Flack for Ward 3.

These candidates are lifelong contributors to our community – business owners, volunteers and advocates committed to progress. Their shared vision includes supporting local businesses, creating more housing options, improving beach safety, upgrading infrastructure and tackling long-ignored issues.

This election will shape our city's future. Let's unite behind leaders who will restore collaboration, growth and pride in South Haven.

Vote Annie Brown, Eddie Polk, Tom Capps and David Flack this November – let's get South Haven back on track.

Ryan Servatius
South Haven

In support of Brown

Dear editor,

I am writing to express my strong support for Annie Brown in her reelection as mayor of South Haven. Annie has proven herself to be a dedicated and effective leader who consistently puts our community first.

Her record of service speaks for itself. Before becoming mayor, Annie served on the South Haven school board for 14 years, where she worked tirelessly to strengthen education and support families. As mayor, she has continued that same commitment to progress by focusing on the issues that matter most to residents.

Under Annie's leadership, South Haven has seen real improvements in housing opportunities, job growth and infrastructure. Our roads and sidewalks are safer and more accessible because of her efforts. She has also been a strong advocate for tourism, recognizing its importance to our local economy while ensuring that visitors feel welcomed and valued in our community. Just as importantly, Annie has been a champion for women-owned businesses, helping create an environment where local entrepreneurs can thrive.

What truly sets Annie apart is her presence in the community. She doesn't just lead from City Hall, she shows up. Whether it's local events, neighborhood activities, or gatherings around town, Annie is there, supporting and celebrating South Haven alongside us.

Annie Brown has shown time and again that she is the right person to guide South Haven forward. I encourage my fellow residents to join me in supporting her reelection as mayor. With her proven leadership and vision, South Haven will continue to thrive.

Jordan Alsup
South Haven

A great advocate

Dear editor,

Re-elect Annie Brown for mayor! As a former council member of nine years, I have observed Annie as a mayor and she has what it takes to lead the council in the right direction for the better of the entire city.

She is a resident of 40 years and business owner of Filbrandt Funeral Home for 22 years. Annie is volunteering her time to be on the boards of VBC Senior Services, SHAES, South Haven Housing, Parks Commission and was on the school board for 14 years. She really understands South Haven and the vision needed for the city's future growth. As a diplomat, she can handle people in a sensitive and effective way and at the same time keep the economic well-being of the needs of the community.

Annie is always prepared for the meetings and has never abstained from a vote! The last two years of being mayor, she has been blocked from leading and moving the city forward. Annie is a great advocate, willing to listen, is respectful and works well with all levels of city employees. What she doesn't know or understands, she finds the answers and information needed.

She has the experience, knowledge, drive and desire to make South Haven a well-balanced community with neighborhoods, and still accommodate tourists for South Haven's financial needs to survive.

Please vote Annie Brown for mayor!

Vicky Kozlik-Wall
South Haven

A transportation crisis

Dear editor,

The persistent, last-minute bus route cancellations in South Haven Public Schools have created a chronic crisis that directly undermines student learning and imposes significant hardship on local families. This isn't just an inconvenience; it's a systemic failure that has become a daily reality, disrupting education and impacting the entire community.

When a route is canceled, students who rely on the bus often miss school or are tardy through no fault of their own, leading to lost instructional time and creating a serious equity gap in educational access. This problem disproportionately harms our most vulnerable families – those with inflexible work schedules, single parents, or limited financial resources.

The consequences extend far beyond the classroom. Parents are frequently forced to scramble for last-minute transportation, causing them to be late for work, lose wages, or risk job security. This daily uncertainty places a severe financial and emotional strain on households. Furthermore, the shift from buses to individual cars is creating traffic congestion and safety hazards around our schools.

Evidence suggests this is a long-standing failure, not a temporary issue. The district has operated with a "severe driver shortage" for years, a problem so dire the transportation director had to personally drive routes for two years. The district's inability to recruit and retain staff, compounded by bus drivers working without a renewed contract since 2022, points to a fundamental breakdown in management.

We call on the South Haven Public Schools Board of Education to publicly acknowledge the severity of this crisis and commit to a transparent, fully-funded action plan. The community needs a sustainable, long-term solution to restore reliable transportation, ensure every child has equitable access to their education, and rebuild the trust between the district and the families it serves. The future of our students depends on the board fulfilling this fundamental responsibility.

Ethan Pulka
South Haven Township

OBITUARY

Carol Levora

Oct. 12, 1944 – Sept. 9, 2025

Carol Jean Levora passed away Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2025 after a struggle with COPD and heart issues.

She enjoyed cooking and baking, especially bread. She was always excited when new babies were born and couldn't wait to spoil them. She loved spoiling her dogs and cats.

Her favorite things to do were to watch movies, especially old ones, listen to classic country and sing. She was always there to listen, give her opinion and share her ideas.

She was proud of her children and many grandchildren, great-grandchildren as well as her nieces, nephews and friends' children. She could never have had enough time to sit and talk with each of them.

She was preceded in death by her husband, John, grandchildren Nicolette, Daniel III, Melissa and CarolAnn; daughter Janell, and son-in-law Daniel Decker.

She is survived by sons, Albert (Fannae) Levora, Jesse (Trisha) Levora, Richard Bud (JoAnn) Levora and John Levora, as well as daughters, Colette Decker, Josette Tyson and Pollyanna Lane, and her many grandchildren and great-grandchildren and family friend, Ida "Beth" Hawkins.

Her life was celebrated by family and friends on Sept. 21 in Bangor, Mich. at Trinity Lutheran Church where she had been a member.

COUNCIL

From page A1

and I felt that I wanted to give back and I know we've had some issues with the city council as it is set up now," Capps said. "I'm hoping that we can go in there and restore some confidence and get things done at a timely manner."

If elected, he said the first thing he would focus on would be to finish some of the issues the current city council hasn't finished yet.

"First, because it's taken so long, some of the issues that the current council is on, if they're still there, we should try to clear those up so they are settled," Capps said. "Then after that, we need to look at our health care issues in South Haven."

Capps said he believes the facilities in South Haven need to be expanded.

"We don't have an urgent care facility and we need to talk to Bronson about that," he said. "Nationally, everybody wants to talk about jobs and housing. Those are probably the biggest issues right there that we need to take care of."

Todd Heinrich, 66, grew up in the suburbs of Detroit, but currently lives in South Haven. He has previously served on a variety of committees and boards including 10 years on the planning commission and the zoning board of appeals in South Haven Township.

Heinrich said he is running for city council to represent South Haven residents.

"I think that it's a really important thing that the city council have people who put residents first," Heinrich said.

He said his focus, if elected, would be on the city council's current priorities.

"The city council's current priorities, which I believe in, their highest priorities this year have been reviewing and scrutinizing our short-term rental policy (and) lifeguards," Heinrich said. "I've knocked on every door in my ward and I was surprised at how disappointed people are in the streets and the roads and their water bills. Those utility bills are a real issue with folks that are in Ward 2."

Eddie Polk could not be reached for comment in time for publication.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

MAYOR

From page A1

"I am running for mayor because we are at a crossroads," Hosley said. "Do we continue with the status quo, where rules and regulations are applied differently to people based on their influence or status? Or do we finally choose a new path with a new leader whose actions advance transparency, fairness and accountability? I am not the status quo; I am the path to new change."

She said her top priority is improving transparency.

"What I would really like to focus on is transparency at all levels, that starts with the agendas, and the staff reports that bring the items to us and having input in a more timely manner," Hosley said. "So many people don't realize that the ward council members do not see the agenda until it publishes. I just really want to get the right information to the city council in a timely manner so that we can have a full discussion of the good, bad and ugly to get things moving forward."

Hosley said she also wants to look into why millages are used for basic things like roads instead of through taxes, to understand how the city's money is being spent in all of the budgets and using local talent instead of hiring consultants.

"That's what I'm about is accountability and making sure we make the right decisions and efficiently use our time," she said. "I think we can get things done more efficiently with people who understand our community and know what we need; and that is listening to our residents."

Hosley said her vision for the future city council involves "partnership and civility."

"What I envision is a government that is a partner with its citizens, not gatekeepers," she said. "We get accountability through transparency, ensuring that all the pertinent information is brought forward and that should not result in longer meetings. It should result in efficient meetings with civil discussions of differing opinions and that's what I would bring."

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

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Meet our Pet of the Week, Pele!

At 11 years old, Pele might technically be a senior, but don't tell him that, he's far too busy proving that age is just a number! This handsome boy has all the energy (and attitude) of a cat half his age. Whether he's chasing toys, plotting his next great escape from the cat room, or chatting up anyone who'll listen, Pele knows how to keep life interesting.

He's got plenty of personality and isn't afraid to show it. If he wants your attention, he'll let you know with his signature meow and maybe a dramatic tail flick for emphasis. Beneath his sassy charm, though, is a sweet, affectionate boy who loves being part of the action and has a big heart to match his big voice. Pele is ready to bring his lively spirit and endless conversation to a home that appreciates a cat with opinions. If you're looking for a furry friend who will always keep you entertained (and never let you forget dinner time), Pele is your guy! Pele is neutered, microchipped, vaccinated and heartworm negative. To submit an adoption application visit al-van.org/adopt

ANGEL ADOPTION EVENT

We are so excited to once again be hosting an Angel Adoption event thanks to a generous donor. All adoption fees have been waived from October 16th until the end of the month. There's never been a better time to add a furry friend to your family!

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST

Dog chew toys (like kongs and nylabones) and toilet paper

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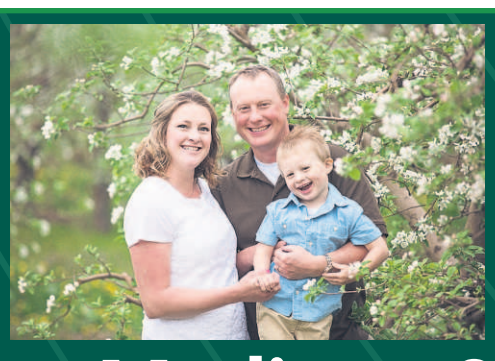

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Michigan Maritime Museum to host Halloween Spooktacular

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The Michigan Maritime Museum will host their Annual Kids' Halloween Spooktacular on Oct. 23.

According to a news release, the family-friendly event will take place from 4 to 6 p.m. at the museum's waterfront campus.

"When children arrive, they'll receive a treasure map leading them to eight themed learning locations across the museum grounds," the release stated. "At each stop, young explorers can take part in hands-on activities, play games and collect candy and prizes."

Along the way, there will be costumes, trick-or-treating and a variety of spooky surprises – all designed to be fun, not frightful.

Families are also invited to explore the museum's exhibits for a special Halloween evening of discovery and excitement.

The event will be held rain or shine. In case of poor weather, festivities will move indoors to the Mike and Linda Winkel and Mike and Sue Smith Maritime Heritage Center.

The family-friendly celebration is sponsored by State Farm Insurance, Kevin Hagan Office, located at 228 Broadway Street, South Haven, MI.

The event is free and open to the public.

"So, put on your costumes and join the Michigan Maritime Museum for a Spooktacular evening of maritime fun and Halloween adventure," the release stated.

FIRE ENGULFS TRAILER IN SOUTH HAVEN

Photo provided / Tom Renner

Four occupants in a trailer in South Haven Township safely evacuated when fire swept across the structure early Thursday morning.

Photos provided

The South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce joined Quilter's Haven to celebrate the opening of their new location with a ribbon cutting ceremony.

Quilter's Haven opens new shop in South Haven

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Quilter's Haven & Unique Michigan Gift Shop recently opened a new location in South Haven.

According to a news release, the South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce joined owners Tim Payne and Robin Ellison to celebrate the opening with a ribbon cutting at 2959 73rd Street Suite 6.

Payne first sold his Michigan-themed photography on ceramic tiles (TileArt) at Center Street Emporium in 2018 and 2019, while Ellison offered longarm quilting services from home.

The move to this new location gives the shop more floor space, better parking and easier access for visitors.

"When a South Haven property became available near the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, they took the leap and the shop quickly became a favorite for locals and visitors alike," the release stated.

Quilter's Haven offers a full range of quilting supplies including fabrics, patterns, notions and longarm quilting services. In 2025 the shop expanded to include yarn, crochet and knitting supplies, with plans for upcoming classes.

"Owners Tim and Robin bring a unique combination of creativity and passion to their business," the release stated.

The gift shop side features Michigan and South Haven themed items created in-house including postcards, magnets, keychains, custom-decorated drinkware and select consignment items.

Payne and Ellison also provide wholesale products to other shops and maintain a presence at the South Haven Farmers Market.

To learn more about Quilter's Haven go to www.quilters-haven-n-gifts.com or call at 269-767-8405.

Quilter's Haven offers a full range of quilting, yarn, crochet and knitting supplies

Van Buren students win statewide poster competition

By TRIBUNE STAFF

LAWRENCE — ProStart students from Van Buren County recently earned first place in the Michigan Hospitality Foundation National Food Safety Education poster design competition.

According to a news release, the team consisted of Bree Steadman, Adriana Rivas, Kyla Hagen, Sabeiva Rodriguez and Levi Hostetler who designed a country western themed poster entitled "Four Musketeers and the Lone Ranger."

The poster competition was hosted during National Food Safety Education Month, which takes place in September, to raise awareness about common foodborne illnesses and steps to prevent them.

"Food safety and restaurant hygiene are critical every day, and this yearly observance provides an important opportunity to increase awareness in and around the hospitality industry, including the ProStart curriculum," the release stated.

The top three teams will receive ServSafe-branded items as prizes for each team member. All participating schools will receive a Case of ServSafe textbooks as well.

"We applaud these students for their creativity and commitment to food safety," Executive Director of the Michigan Hospitality Foundation Amanda Smith said in the release. "Food safety isn't just a competition topic. It's an essential skill that lies at the heart of hospitality and the ProStart curriculum."

Topics from this year's theme, "Food Safety's Most Wanted," included the four major violations behind countless failed inspections and foodborne illness outbreaks.

For more information on food safety and National Food Safety Month go to www.michiganfoodsafety.com.

SH suspends non-emergency water, sewer connections

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The City of South Haven recently announced that all non-emergency water and sewer service connections will be suspended for the season starting Nov. 1.

According to a news release, the suspension is for the South Haven Area Water Sewer Authority system in the city and county rights-of-way.

"The City of South Haven does not allow new construction activities within the street right-of-way between Nov. 15 and March 1, unless approved by the city engineer," the release stated.

Allegan and Van Buren County road commissions have similar restrictions.

Pavement removal is limited during winter months to minimize the inconvenience to traffic and protect existing roadways.

"Local asphalt plants close in mid-November which limits the ability to restore the roadway surface following underground construction," the release stated. "Customers experiencing a water or sewer emergency will still be assisted."

New service taps that do not require cutting a roadway will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Customers wanting to install water or sewer connections in the road after Nov. 1 must wait until spring.

"We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause," the release stated.

For questions contact the South Haven Department of Public Works at 269-637-0737.

South Haven Tribune

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0900 LEGALS

PUBLIC NOTICE

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Public Accuracy Test for the November 4, 2025, Election has been scheduled for Tuesday, October 28, 2025, at 10:00 am at the South Haven Charter Township Hall at 09761 Blue Star Highway, South Haven, Michigan 49090

The Public Accuracy Test is conducted to determine that the programs and the computers being used to tabulate the results of the election count the votes in the manner prescribed by the law.

NOTICE IS FURTHER GIVEN that the South Haven Township Clerk's Office will be open on Saturday, November 1, 2025, from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. to issue absentee ballots.

Brenda Bertorelli
South Haven Charter Twp. Clerk

PUBLIC HEARING
For 2026 Budget For South Haven Charter Township
Will be held on November 12th, 2025, at 7:30 p.m.
At the Township Hall located at 09761 Blue Star Highway, South Haven, MI 49090

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PUBLIC/LEGAL NOTICES

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Please allow 48 hours to process, larger legals may need at least four business days.

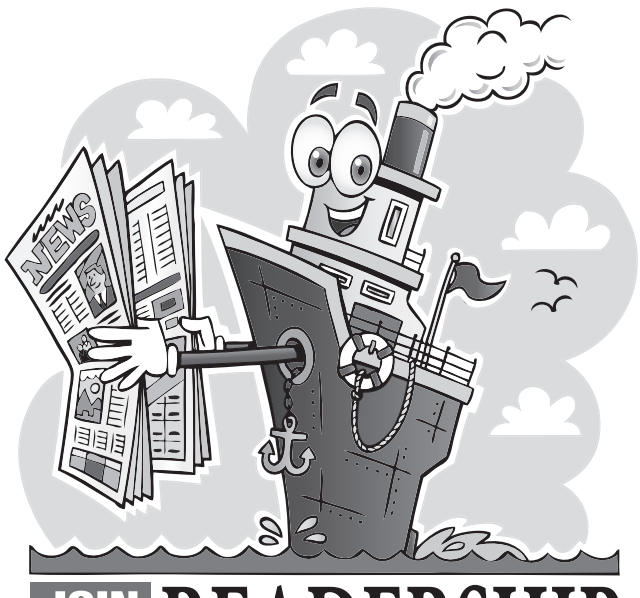
SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP VAN BUREN COUNTY, MICHIGAN NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

The Zoning Board of Appeals of South Haven Charter Township will hold a public hearing and regular meeting at the South Haven Township Hall 09761 Blue Star Hwy on Thursday November 6, 2025, 6:30pm for the following variance applications:

Eric and Emily Austin have petitioned for dimensional variances to construct a covered front porch and a garage addition at 12688 Blue Star Hwy (80-17-022-090-25). Required front setback is 110ft centerline of Blue Star Hwy; garage addition request is for 8ft of relief (102ft from center line); covered front porch request is for 5ft of relief (105ft from center line).

Phillip and Kandace VanReken have petitioned for a dimensional variance to enclose an existing screen porch at 16626 77th St (80-17-032-010-11). Required side setback is 10ft; request is for 2ft 3 ½in of relief (to be 7ft 8 ½ in from property line).

PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that the application can be reviewed at the Township Hall during the zoning administrator hours Tues's 9-12p and Thurs's 1:30-4p or call 269-637-3305 / 1-800-626-5964 or request by email shtwp.zoninga@gmail.com. Written comment may also be submitted to the zoning administrator.
PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that written comments may be submitted to the Township Clerk at the address set forth below, during regular business hours of regular business days or by mail at the address set forth below, up to the date of the hearing and will also be accepted by the Planning Commission at the hearing.
South Haven Charter Township will provide necessary reasonable auxiliary aids and services to individuals with disabilities at the hearing upon seven (7) days' notice to the South Haven Charter Township Clerk.
South Haven Charter Township Hall
Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk
09761 Blue Star Highway
South Haven, MI 49090
269-637-3305



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CHARTER TOWNSHIP OF SOUTH HAVEN NOTICE OF ADOPTION OF ORDINANCE NO. 170 AN ORDINANCE TO AMEND ORDINANCE TO PROVIDE FOR A SERVICE CHARGE IN LIEU OF TAXES FOR DWELLING UNITS FOR LOW INCOME PERSONS OR FAMILIES (LIGHTHOUSE RIDGE APARTMENTS)

PLEASE TAKE NOTICE that at its meeting October 8, 2025, the Township Board adopted Ordinance No.170 "An Ordinance to Amend Ordinance to Provide For A Service Charge In Lieu of Taxes for Dwelling Units for Low Income Persons and Families (Lighthouse Ridge Apartments)." The following is a summary of the Ordinance. A true copy of the Ordinance is available for inspection or purchase at the office of the Township Clerk, 09761 Blue Star Memorial Hwy, South Haven, MI 49090, or online at http://www.southhaventwp.com. The Ordinance takes effect upon publication.

ORDINANCE NO. 170
ORDINANCE TO AMEND ORDINANCE TO PROVIDE FOR A SERVICE CHARGE IN LIEU OF TAXES FOR DWELLING UNITS FOR LOW INCOME PERSONS AND FAMILIES (LIGHTHOUSE RIDGE APARTMENTS)

Section 1 removes Section 9 of the Ordinance in its entirety.
Section 2 makes the Ordinance's provisions severable.
Section 3 repeals all ordinances or parts of ordinances to the extent necessary to give the Ordinance full force and effect.
Section 4 states the Ordinance takes effect once published.

Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk
South Haven Township Hall
09761 Blue Star Memorial Hwy, South Haven, MI 49090
(269) 637-3305

CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE PLANNING COMMISSION

On Thursday, November 6, 2025, the Planning Commission for the City of South Haven will hear public comments related to the following request(s). The public hearing(s) will be held at 7:00 P.M. at City Hall, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven concerning the following:

1. Special Land Use Application – 220 Park Avenue
Mr. Michael Lang has submitted a special land use application to use the dwelling unit located at 220 Park Avenue in the City of South Haven as a short-term rental. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-714-009-00.

2. Special Land Use Application – 304 Ash Street
Mr. and Mrs. James and Allyson Carter have submitted a special land use application to use the dwelling unit located at 304 Ash Street in the City of South Haven as a short-term rental. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-877-056-00.

3. Special Land Use Application – 511 Phoenix Street, Unit 2
Mr. and Mrs. Marc and Kathleen Hausmann have submitted a special land use application to use the dwelling unit located at 511 Phoenix Street, Unit 2 in the City of South Haven as a short-term rental. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-770-007-75.

4. Planned Unit Development Rezoning Application – 706 and 712 Virginia Avenue
Mr. and Mrs. Michael and Carrie Lynch have submitted an application for planned unit development rezoning for the property located at 706 and 712 Virginia Avenue in the City of South Haven. The proposed condominium development would include six single-family dwelling units and a riverfront dock with six boat slips. The parcel numbers for the referenced addresses are 80-53-852-024-00 and 80-53-870-001-01.

5. Zoning Map Amendment (Rezoning) Application – 120 Baseline Road and 201 Webster Avenue
Mr. David Wiatrowski, on behalf of 120 Baseline LLC, has submitted an application to rezone the property located at 120 Baseline Road and 201 Webster Avenue in the City of South Haven. The parcel at 120 Baseline is approximately 7.53-acres and is currently zoned RM-1 Multiple-Family Residential. The parcel at 201 Webster is approximately 0.13-acres and is currently zoned R-1B Single-Family Residential. The property owner seeks to rezone both parcels to MHC Manufactured Housing Community District. The parcel numbers for the referenced addresses are 80-53-895-030-00 and 80-53-750-021-00.

Supporting documentation is available for review at the Building Services office, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090. Written comments may be submitted in lieu of or in addition to a personal appearance. Written comments must be received no later than 12 p.m. (noon) on Thursday, November 6, 2025. Written comments should be addressed to the Planning Commission and must be submitted to the Zoning Administrator at kdissette@southhavenmi.gov or via postal mail addressed to the Planning Commission and sent to 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090.

Individuals requesting reasonable accommodation for impairments or disabilities should contact the City Clerk no later than five days prior to the public hearing in person at City Hall, at 269-637-0750, or at mkiker@southhavenmi.gov.

Kelly Getman-Dissette, Zoning Administrator
(269) 637-0760 kdissette@southhavenmi.gov

SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP SYNOPSIS REGULAR MEETING OCTOBER 8, 2025

PRESENT: Poole, Bertorelli, Wiatrowski, Lewandowski, DeGrandchamp, Fisher
ABSENT: Stein
Motion to approve September 10, 2025, Regular Meeting Minutes.
Acting Chief Adam DeBoer gave a report for SHPD. **Zach Kenreich** gave a report for SHAES. Resident Kristin Parker from 72nd Street was in attendance to discuss an unlicensed campground next door to her home.
Motion to approve the agenda.
Trustee Poole reported that the Samaritas application for a housing project has been submitted. Trustee Wiatrowski reported that there are 4 inspections left to do for STR.
Motion to Set a Public Hearing on November 12th for the 2026 Budget.
Motion to Adopt Resolution 25-26 to Introduce Ordinance #171 a rezoning on 73.5 Street.
Motion to adopt Resolution 25-27 to Approving an Annexation of 2001.
Motion to adopt Resolution 25-28 to Adopt Ordinance # 170 Amending Ordinance #160.
Discussion was held regarding two plowing bids that were received.
Motion to continuing receiving Plowing Services at the Township Hall from Elevate.
Reports were received. W.C.Askew from the Road Commission was in attendance.
Motion to approve payment of bills in the amount of $55,304.
Meeting was adjourned at 8:16 p.m.
Respectfully submitted, Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk

CHARTER TOWNSHIP OF SOUTH HAVEN NOTICE OF POSTING OF ORDINANCE NO. 171, ORDINANCE AMENDING THE ZONING ORDINANCE OF SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP TO REZONE 73rd ST PROPERTY

PLEASE TAKE NOTICE that at its regular meeting on October 8, 2025, the Township Board introduced Ordinance No. 171 entitled "Ordinance Amending the Zoning Ordinance of South Haven Charter Township to Rezone Stegman Property." The ordinance proposes to amend the South Haven Township Zoning District Map for the following real property:

Parcel No. 80-17-011-01-01 & 80-17-011-032-60
73rd St
COMMENCING AT THE NORTH QUARTER POST OF SECTION 11, TOWN 1 SOUTH, RANGE 17 WEST, CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN, VAN BUREN COUNTY, MICHIGAN; THENCE SOUTH 00°21'10" EAST (RECORDED AS SOUTH 00°21'30" EAST) ALONG THE NORTH AND SOUTH QUARTER LINE OF SAID SECTION, 812.31 FEET TO THE CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN AND SOUTH HAVEN TOWNSHIP LINE, SAID LINE DESCRIBED AS BEING 812.31 FEET SOUTH OF AND PARALLEL TO THE NORTH SECTION LINE, AND THE PLACE OF BEGINNING; THENCE NORTH 88°04'12" EAST ALONG SAID LINE, 250.06 FEET TO THE WEST RIGHT-OF-WAY LINE OF I-196; THENCE SOUTH 29°43'57" EAST (RECORDED AS SOUTH 29°44'14" EAST) ALONG SAID RIGHT-OF-WAY LINE, 89.26 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 22°38'12" EAST, 184.38 FEET (RECORDED AS SOUTH 22°36'50" EAST, 184.45 FEET); THENCE SOUTH 10°17'40" EAST, 123.44 FEET (RECORDED AS SOUTH 10°16'46" EAST, 123.58 FEET); THENCE NORTH 88°02'26" EAST (RECORDED AS NORTH 88°06'00" EAST), 10.13 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 00°01'50" WEST, 791.50 FEET (RECORDED AS SOUTH 00°01'22" WEST, 791.34 FEET), ALL ALONG SAID RIGHT-OF-WAY; THENCE SOUTH 88°06'18" WEST, 389.96 FEET (RECORDED AS SOUTH 88°06'50" WEST, 390.08 FEET) TO THE NORTH AND SOUTH QUARTER LINE OF SECTION 11; THENCE NORTH 00°21'10" WEST (RECORDED AS NORTH 00°21'10" WEST), 1164.79 FEET TO THE PLACE OF BEGINNING. CONTAINING 9.98 ACRES MORE OR LESS.

from its CSC (Community Service Commercial) zoning designation to HDR (High Density Residential) PUD (Planned Unit Development) and establish corresponding regulations and land uses.

The ordinance is available in its entirety for public inspection and is posted at the office of the Township Clerk, 09761 Blue Star Memorial Hwy, South Haven, MI 49090 and on the website of the Charter Township of South Haven, http://www.southhaventwp.com. The proposed ordinance will be considered for adoption by the Township Board at its regular meeting on **November 12, 2025.**

Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk
South Haven Township Hall
09761 Blue Star Memorial Hwy South Haven, MI 49090
(269) 637-3305

RESERVE THIS SPACE TODAY!

Classifieds Make A Cash Connection!

Van Buren County hosts free recycling event

By TRIBUNE STAFF

LAWRENCE — Van Buren Conservation District recently hosted the Recycle Roundup event for Van Buren County residents and landowners.

According to a news release, the free household recycling event took place at the Van Buren ISD Tech Center in Lawrence.

"The event provides a convenient way for residents to dispose of hard-to-recycle materials like hazardous waste, electronics, tires and foam," the release stated.

Dart Container, a leading provider of sustainable food-service packaging solutions, is supported the event by handling the collection and transportation of clean foam polystyrene materials.

All collected foam will be processed at Dart's Michigan facility and repurposed by manufacturers into products including picture frames and crown molding.

Accepted materials included:

■ Rigid foam packaging and containers

■ Clean foam cups, clamshells and meat trays

■ Household Hazardous Waste: Cleaners, batteries, light bulbs, antifreeze, solvents, aerosol cans, mercury items and medications.

■ Paint: Oil-based paints, aerosol and thinners

■ Electronics

■ Tires

■ Additional Items: Sharps (needles, lancets, epi-pens), hearing aids, eyeglasses, walking canes and American flags.

For more information contact Kalli Marshall at 269-657-4030 x5 or via email at resourcerecovery@vanburencd.org.

THE COLORS OF FALL

Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

Stanley Johnston Park showcases the changing colors of the fall leaves early Thursday morning.

Whitefish crash has fishers on the brink

By KELLY HOUSE/ BRIDGE MICHIGAN
Bridge Michigan

For more than three decades, Great Lakes fisherman Richard Boda has kept a handwritten logbook of his time on the water – a legacy to the son and daughter who would one day inherit the family business.

Jotted in a waterproof notepad each day and transferred to a spiral binder at night, the notes detail weather, net locations, fish catches and his love for family who often joined him aboard the Izzie Kate.

"My thinking was, they could refer back to things if they ever got in a pinch – if they couldn't find fish or they tried to figure out a new place to go," said Boda, 56, a third-generation commercial fisherman and a member of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians.

"They could look at that book and say, 'OK, my dad was here. This is what he did.'"

That was the hope. Instead, the book has become a diary of species collapse, a first-hand account of the decimation of whitefish that have fed Great Lakes denizens for millenia.

The logbook that begins with bounties in Lake Huron takes a turn in the early 2000s, when invasive mussels colonized the lake and hogged the food. In more recent years, it recounts how Boda began focusing on Lake Michigan, only for the crisis to follow him there. A passage this year details the day when he caught just 87 pounds, worth about $250.

"I basically got my gas money back, and that was about it," Boda said.

The book could have been written by any of a few dozen fisherfolk remaining on the Great Lakes, trying to eke out a living from an ecosystem forever changed. Gross catches have declined 70 percent in 15 years in Lakes Michigan and Huron, where whitefish account for about 90 percent of the commercial catch with a dockside value of roughly $5.8 million. The fish's total economic impact is significantly higher, given its immense popularity with restaurant diners and Up North tourists.

It's a crisis unlike anywhere else in the world, said Grantly Galland, project director for international fisheries with the Pew Charitable Trusts. Collapsing fisheries are common. But they're almost always caused by overfishing.

That's a simple fix: Dock the boats until stocks recover.

In the Great Lakes, blame lies with billions of invasive quagga and zebra mussels that have become the lower lakes' dominant life form, siphoning nutrients and creating famine throughout the food chain.

There's not much, if anything, fishermen can do to help.

"No amount of personal sacrifice is going to lead to future benefits," Gallant said.

Some fishers have hung up their nets for good. Other holdouts work side jobs or clean, smoke and sell their whitefish directly to consumers to maximize profits. Tribal fishers with the right to target other species have often done so, while the state-regulated fishers lobby Michigan lawmakers for similar flexibility.

But it's not clear whether any of it will be enough to keep these multi-generational businesses afloat if the whitefish keep disappearing.

"Something's got to give," said Scott Everett, legislative consultant for the Michigan Fish Producers Association, or the lower lakes fishing industry "is going to go away."

A crisis like no other

At its heyday a century ago, tens of thousands of Michiganders worked in commercial fishing.

Overfishing tanked populations, leading to bitter battles over the remaining catch, stricter regulations and a much smaller industry by the time Boda took over his late grandfather's license in 1991.

The survivors found steady income in a more tightly managed industry, subject to strict quotas and clear lines of delineation: Commercial operations, both state-regulated and tribal, split most of the whitefish catch, while sportfishers got most salmon and shared the lake trout with the tribes.

Lakes Michigan and Huron were the commercial industry's lifeblood, accounting for about 80 percent of the state's total catch with far lesser amounts coming from Lake Superior.

"We did pretty good for a long time," said Boda, who lives in Brutus near Petoskey. Some years, he made as much as $100,000.

His sister and late brother sometimes fished alongside him.His 32-year-old son, Nate, began tagging along when he was so tiny he napped on a pile of life jackets and stood on a 5-gallon bucket to reach the Izzie Kate's wheel.

Their view every day was sunrise through what Boda described as "the most beautiful office window."

When the weather turned nasty or the fishing turned bad, Boda would pray to his grandfather, "help us out on the lake today."

It always seemed to work until the mussels took over.

After arriving in the Great Lakes in the late 1980s and early 90s, invasive zebra and quagga mussels from eastern Europe soon took over. The small shellfish now carpet the bottom of lakes Michigan and Huron, gobbling plankton and algae that once supported a rich underwater food web.

Whitefish have been hit the hardest.

For years now, their offspring have been dying of starvation and sunburn soon after hatching, leaving the lakes with a thinning population of aging adults. Stocks are now on the brink of collapse in much of the lower lakes, except for spots like the Saginaw Bay and Lower Green Bay, where nutrient-laden farm runoff offsets the mussels' impact.

Nowadays, Boda struggles to clear $40,000 in income. If his grandfather was alive, "he probably would be like, 'Pack it up,'" Boda said.

State and tribal regulators have ratcheted down allowable harvests in hopes of slowing the decline, but they admit it won't make much difference. So long as mussels dominate the lakes (and so far, nobody has figured out how to suppress them) the fish will struggle to reproduce until they eventually die of old age.

South Haven man leads police on chase in Hagar Township

Sheriff in search of two other suspects involved with burglary

By TRIBUNE STAFF

COLOMA — A suspected burglar is in custody after fleeing Berrien County sheriff deputies and crashing into a patrol vehicle in Hagar Township.

Another two people, who have not been identified, are being sought by authorities for the house burglary that allegedly took place prior to police intervening.

Deputies were dispatched to the area of 5780 Erie St. in Hagar Township at about 5 a.m. Sept. 27 for an active breaking and entering in progress, after a neighbor reported suspicious activity. Upon arriving in the area, deputies observed a U-Haul box truck leaving a residence at a high rate of speed.

According to a statement from the Berrien County Sheriff's Office that was released Tuesday, deputies attempted to conduct a traffic stop. However, the driver refused to stop, leading deputies on a short pursuit. The chase ended when the U-Haul truck stopped momentarily, then reversed, ramming and disabling a patrol vehicle before speeding away again.

The vehicle was later located after crashing into a tree near Hagar Place and Carolyn Street.

Police said one suspect fled the scene on foot, while another crawled from the stopped vehicle. The driver remained inside and was taken into custody by sheriff deputies.

The driver was identified as 47-year-old Ira Clough of South Haven. A check of the residence confirmed forced entry had taken place.

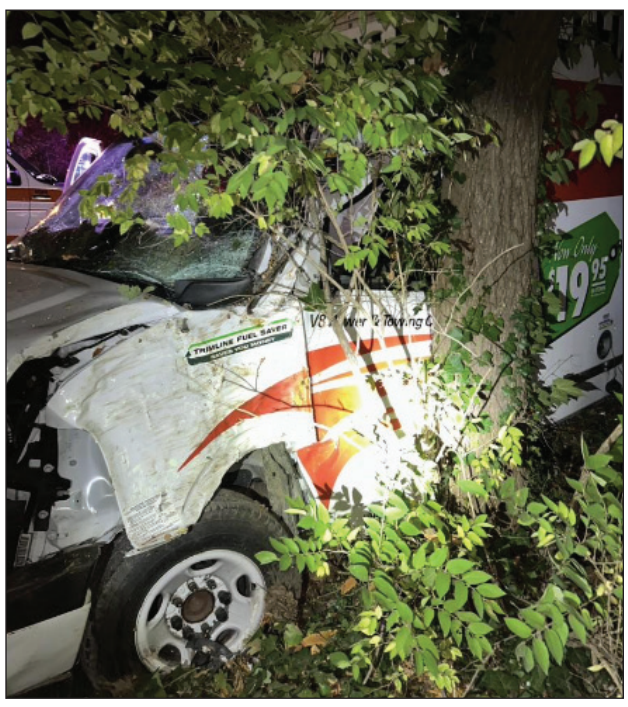

Photo provided / Berrien County Sheriff's Department

A South Haven man is in custody and two other suspects are at large after fleeing police and ramming into a deputy's vehicle with a U-Haul truck on Sept. 27 in Hagar Township.

CLOUGH

Clough was arrested and charged with multiple offenses, including fleeing and eluding, aggravated felony assault, burglary – forced entry, possession of stolen property, damage to property, violation of controlled substance, obstructing police and a weapons offense.

Police said Clough also had outstanding arrest warrants from neighboring counties and was lodged at the Berrien County jail.

Sgt. Brandon Crosby and K-9 officer Zeke, along with Deputy Jessica Frucci and K-9 officer Rex, conducted a track in and attempt to locate the two other suspects who fled on foot. Despite several hours of searching, the suspects were not located.

The sheriff's office is asking for the public's assistance in identifying the two suspects for prosecution.

Other area agencies that assisted with the incident included the Berrien County K-9 unit, Berrien County Evidence Tech team, Michigan State Police, Watervliet Police Department, Coloma Township Police Department and Medic 1 Ambulance.

"The Berrien County Sheriff's Office would like to thank all assisting agencies for their help in this investigation, as well as the vigilant neighbor whose report led to the arrest," the release stated. "We encourage the public to remain alert and take an active role in safeguarding their neighborhoods."

If anyone observes suspicious activity, they can contact the Berrien County 911 Center at 866-630-7679 for non-emergencies, or dial 911 in the event of an emergency.

The Spotlight
A Weekly Guide To Services & Business Around Town.

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If interested in including your business here contact freid@thehp.com

SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

South Haven Center for the Arts: "Altered Consumerism" exhibition from Aug. 8 through Sept. 20.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1-4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Photo provided / Tom Renner

South Haven's Anival Balmares and Paw Paw's Grant Sholander battle for possession of the ball during the district tournament semi-final game.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays.

South Haven Farm Market: Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. through October at Huron Street Pavilion.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Lake Arvesta: Summer at the pasture concert every Friday and Saturday at 6 p.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: New Exhibit – "The Adventures of Liberty Hyde Bailey – Chicago: 1872." Available during museum hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: "The Gift of Mnoomin" by Brittany Luby and Joshua Mangeshig Pawis-Steckley Storywalk. Available from Oct. 1 through 31.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge – Chicago Scoring: noon on Tuesdays. Lakeside Entertainment, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Bridge – Duplicate Scoring: 1 pm on Wednesdays. Lakeside Entertainment, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

South Haven Center for the Arts: "The Ghost that Linger" art exhibition available through Nov. 8.

October

19 – Scott Club: Jazz Pianist Xavier Davis presents "An Afternoon of Jazz." Free concert, RSVP required.

20 – Volleyball: Girls middle school against Saugatuck at 5:30 p.m.

21 – Rotary Club: Evening meeting at the American Legion beginning at 5 p.m. Managing Director of the Van Buren County Road Commission Bret Witkowski will present and Dan Thompson is the program chair.

23 – Michigan Maritime Museum: Spooktacular kids event from 4 to 6 p.m.

24 – Football: Boys varsity against Galesburg-Augusta at 7 p.m. at Ratcliffe Field.

24 – South Haven Memorial Library: South Haven Writers read-around. New writers welcome from 1 to 4 p.m.

25 – St. Paul Lutheran Church: Truck or Treat from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

25 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club at 11 a.m. Registration is recommended.

25 – American Legion Post 49: Halloween Kids Party from 1 to 3 p.m.

25 – Decadent Dogs: Howl--Ween Pooch Parade at 3 p.m. at Dyckman Park.

25 – LifeBridge Church: Trunk or Treat from 3 to 5 p.m.

25 – Kal-Haven Outpost: Fall Festival including s'more, hot cocoa and pumpkin bowling beginning at 3 p.m.

25 – VFW Post 667: Halloween Trunk or Treat from 4 to 5 p.m.

25 – Bumbleberry Acres: Glow Night and Haunted Corn Maze from 6 to 10 p.m.

25 – The Headless Horseman rides again: Headless Horseman will ride downtown South Haven at dusk.

26 – Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: Pumpkin Boo-Walk starting at 6:45 p.m.

26 – Al-Van Humane Society: Pumpkin Painting from noon to 2 p.m.

26 – Cranes Orchards: Halloween in the Orchard from 4:30 to 6 p.m.

28 – South Haven Young Professionals: Coffee Connections from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. at The Flying Saucer.

28 – Rotary Club: Club Assembly and Rotary President Amy Nichols to present.

29 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

30 – South Haven Tri-M Music Honor Society: Halloween Carnival rom 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. at the South Haven High School gym.

30 – First Baptist Church: Pumpkinfest from 6:30 to 8 p.m. on the gym. Free event with games, activities and candy.

30 – New Holland Distilling: Spooks and Spells cocktails class from 6 to 8 p.m.

30 – Douglas Cove: Sweet Smile and Spooky Styles from 5 to 7 p.m.

31 – Goody's Wash N' Go: Trunk or Treat from 4 to 6 p.m.

31 – South Haven Nursing and Rehab: Community Trick-or-Treat from 5 to 7 p.m.

31 – Laurel Oaks: Boo-tiful Night trunk-or-treat from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.

31 – Daydreamer Domes: Welcome to the Circus from 8 to 11 p.m.

31 – Trick-or-Treat: City wide trick-or-treating from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.

If your business is interested in being featured in this space monthly, contact us at 269-429-2400 ext 402.

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FOCUS

Why fears of a trillion-dollar AI bubble are growing

By SETH FIEGERMAN and CARMEN REINICKE
Bloomberg News (TNS)

Nathan Howard / Getty Images / TNS

In an aerial view, an Amazon Web Services data center is shown on July 17, 2024, in Stone Ridge, Virginia.

For almost as long as the artificial intelligence boom has been in full swing, there have been warnings of a speculative bubble that could rival the dot-com craze of the late 1990s that ended in a spectacular crash and a wave of bankruptcies.

Tech firms are spending hundreds of billions of dollars on advanced chips and data centers, not just to keep pace with a surge in the use of chatbots such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude, but to make sure they're ready to handle a more fundamental and disruptive shift of economic activity from humans to machines. The final bill may run into the trillions. The financing is coming from venture capital, debt and, lately, some more unconventional arrangements that have raised eyebrows on Wall Street.

Even some of AI's biggest cheerleaders acknowledge the market is frothy, while still professing their belief in the technology's long-term potential. AI, they say, is poised to reshape multiple industries, cure diseases and generally accelerate human progress.

Yet never before has so much money been spent so rapidly on a technology that, for all its potential, remains somewhat unproven as a profit-making business model. Tech industry executives who privately doubt the most effusive assessments of AI's revolutionary potential – or at least struggle to see how to monetize it – may feel they have little choice but to keep pace with their rivals' investments or risk being out-scaled and sidelined in the future AI marketplace.

What are the warning signs for AI?

When Sam Altman, the chief executive of ChatGPT maker OpenAI, announced a $500 billion AI infrastructure plan known as Stargate alongside other executives at the White House in January, the price tag triggered some disbelief. Since then, other tech rivals have ramped up spending, including Meta's Mark Zuckerberg, who has pledged to invest hundreds of billions in data centers. Not to be outdone, Altman has since said he expects OpenAI to spend "trillions" on AI infrastructure.

To finance those projects, OpenAI is entering into new territory. In September, chipmaker Nvidia Corp. announced an agreement to invest up to $100 billion in OpenAI's data center buildout, a deal that some analysts say raises questions about whether the chipmaker is trying to prop up its customers so that they keep spending on its own products.

The concerns have followed Nvidia, to varying degrees, for much of the boom. The dominant maker of AI accelerator chips has backed dozens of companies in recent years, including AI model makers and cloud computing providers. Some of them then use that capital to buy Nvidia's expensive semiconductors. The OpenAI deal was far larger in scale.

OpenAI has also indicated it could pursue debt financing, rather than leaning on partners such as Microsoft Corp. and Oracle Corp. The difference is that those companies have rock-solid, established businesses that have been profitable for many years. OpenAI expects to burn through $115 billion of cash through 2029, The Information has reported.

Other large tech companies are also relying increasingly on debt to support their unprecedented spending. Meta, for example, turned to lenders to secure $26 billion in financing for a planned data center complex in Louisiana that it says will eventually approach the size of Manhattan. JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group are also leading a loan of more than $22 billion to support Vantage Data Centers' plan to build a massive data-center campus, Bloomberg News has reported.

So how about the payback?

By 2030, AI companies will need $2 trillion in combined annual revenue to fund the computing power needed to meet projected demand, Bain & Co. said in a report released in September. Yet their revenue is likely to fall $800 billion short of that mark, Bain predicted.

"The numbers that are being thrown around are so extreme that it's really, really hard to understand them," said David Einhorn, a prominent hedge fund manager and founder of Greenlight Capital. "I'm sure it's not zero, but there's a reasonable chance that a tremendous amount of capital destruction is going to come through this cycle."

In a sign of the times, there's also a growing number of less proven firms trying to capitalize on the data center goldrush. Nebius, an Amsterdam-based cloud provider that split off from Russian internet giant Yandex in 2024, recently inked an infrastructure deal with Microsoft worth up to $19.4 billion. And Nscale, a little-known British data center company, is working with Nvidia, OpenAI and Microsoft on build-outs in Europe. Like some other AI infrastructure providers, Nscale previously focused on another frothy sector: cryptocurrency mining.

Are there concerns about the technology itself?

The data center spending spree is overshadowed by persistent skepticism about the payoff from AI technology. In August, investors were rattled after researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that 95 percent of organizations saw zero return on their investment in AI initiatives.

More recently, researchers at Harvard and Stanford offered a possible explanation for why. Employees are using AI to create "workslop," which the researchers define as "AI generated work content that masquerades as good work, but lacks the substance to meaningfully advance a given task."

The promise of AI has long been that it would help streamline tasks and boost productivity, making it an invaluable asset for workers and one that corporations would pay top dollar for. Instead, the Harvard and Stanford researchers found the prevalence of workslop could cost larger organizations millions of dollars a year in lost productivity.

AI developers have also been confronting a different challenge. OpenAI, Claude chatbot developer Anthropic and others have for years bet on the so-called scaling laws – the idea that more computing power, data and larger models will inevitably pave the way for greater leaps in the power of AI. Eventually, they say, these advances will lead to artificial general intelligence, a hypothetical form of the technology so sophisticated that it matches or exceeds humans in most tasks.

Over the past year, however, these developers have experienced diminishing returns from their costly efforts to build more advanced AI. Some have also struggled to match their own hype. After months of touting GPT-5 as a significant leap, OpenAI's release of its latest AI model in August was met with mixed reviews. In remarks around the launch, Altman conceded that "we're still missing something quite important" to reach AGI.

Those concerns are compounded by growing competition from China, where companies are flooding the market with competitive, low-cost AI models. While U.S. firms are generally still viewed as ahead in the race, the Chinese alternatives risk undercutting Silicon Valley on price in certain markets, making it harder to recoup the significant investment in AI infrastructure.

There's also the risk that the AI industry's vast data center buildout, entailing a huge increase in electricity consumption, will be held back by the realities of strained national power networks.

What does the AI industry say in response?

Sam Altman, the face of the current AI boom, has repeatedly acknowledged the risk of a bubble in recent months while maintaining his optimism for the technology. "Are we in a phase where investors as a whole are overexcited about AI? In my opinion, yes," he said in August. "Is AI the most important thing to happen in a very long time? My opinion is also yes."

Altman and other tech leaders continue to express confidence in the roadmap toward AGI, with some suggesting it could be closer than skeptics think. "Developing superintelligence is now in sight," Zuckerberg wrote in July, referencing an even more powerful form of AI that his company is aiming for. In the near term, some AI developers also say they need to drastically ramp up computing capacity to support the rapid adoption of their services. Altman, in particular, has stressed repeatedly that OpenAI remains constrained in computing resources as hundreds of millions of people around the world use its services to converse with ChatGPT, write code and generate images and videos.

OpenAI and Anthropic have also released their own research and evaluations that indicate AI systems are having a meaningful impact on work tasks, in contrast to the more damning reports from outside academic institutions. An Anthropic report released in September found that roughly three quarters of companies are using Claude to automate work. The same month, OpenAI released a new evaluation system called GDPval that measures the performance of AI models across dozens of occupations.

"We found that today's best frontier models are already approaching the quality of work produced by industry experts," OpenAI said in a blog post. "Especially on the subset of tasks where models are particularly strong, we expect that giving a task to a model before trying it with a human would save time and money."

So how much will customers eventually be willing to pay for these services? The hope among developers is that, as AI models improve and field more complex tasks on users' behalf, they will be able to convince businesses and individuals to spend far more to access the technology.

"I want the door open to everything," OpenAI Chief Financial Officer Sarah Friar said in late 2024, when asked about a report that the company has discussed a $2,000 monthly subscription for its AI products. "If it's helping me move about the world with literally a Ph.D.-level assistant for anything that I'm doing, there are certainly cases where that would make all the sense in the world."

In September, Zuckerberg said an AI bubble is "quite possible," but stressed that his bigger concern is not spending enough to meet the opportunity. "If we end up misspending a couple of hundred billion dollars, I think that that is going to be very unfortunate, obviously," he said in a podcast interview. "But what I'd say is I actually think the risk is higher on the other side."

What makes a market bubble?

Bubbles are economic cycles defined by a swift increase in market values to levels that aren't supported by the underlying fundamentals. They're usually followed by a sharp selloff – the so-called pop.

A bubble often begins when investors get swept up in a speculative frenzy – over a new technology or other market opportunity – and pile in for fear of missing out on further gains. American economist Hyman Minsky identified five stages of a market bubble: displacement, boom, euphoria, profit-taking and panic.

Bubbles are sometimes difficult to spot because market prices can become dislocated from real-world values for many reasons, and a sharp price drop isn't always inevitable. And, because a crash is part of a bubble cycle, they can be hard to pinpoint until after the fact.

Generally, bubbles pop when investors realize that the lofty expectations they had were too high. This usually follows a period of over-exuberance that tips into mania, when everyone is buying into the trend at the very top. What comes next is a usually a slow, prolonged selloff where company earnings start to suffer, or a singular event that changes the long-term view, sending investors dashing for the exits.

There was some fear that an AI bubble had already popped in late January, when China's DeepSeek upended the market with the release of a competitive AI model purportedly built at a fraction of the amount that top U.S. developers spend. DeepSeek's viral success triggered a trillion-dollar selloff of technology shares. Nvidia, a bellwether AI stock, slumped 17 percent in one day.

The DeepSeek episode underscored the risks of investing heavily in AI. But Silicon Valley remained largely undeterred. In the months that followed, tech companies redoubled their costly AI spending plans, and investors resumed cheering on these bets. Nvidia shares charged back from an April low to fresh records. It was worth more than $4 trillion by the end of September, making it the most valuable company in the world.

So is this 1999 all over again?

As with today's AI boom, the companies at the center of the dot-com frenzy drew in vast amounts of investor capital, often using questionable metrics such as website traffic rather than their actual ability to turn a profit. There were many flawed business models and exaggerated revenue projections. Telecommunication companies raced to build fiber-optic networks only to find the demand wasn't there to pay for them. When it all crashed in 2001, many companies were liquidated, others absorbed by healthier rivals at knocked-down prices.

Echoes of the dot-com era can be found in AI's massive infrastructure build-out, sky-high valuations and showy displays of wealth. Venture capital investors have been courting AI startups with private jets, box seats and big checks. Many AI startups tout their recurring revenue as a key metric for growth, but there are doubts as to how sustainable or predictable those projections are, particularly for younger businesses. Some AI firms are completing multiple mammoth fundraisings in a single year. Not all will necessarily flourish.

"I think there's a lot of parallels to the internet bubble," said Bret Taylor, OpenAI's chairman and the CEO of Sierra, an AI startup valued at $10 billion. Like the dot-com era, a number of high-flying companies will almost certainly go bust. But in Taylor's telling, there will also be large businesses that emerge and thrive over the long term, just as happened with Amazon.com Inc. and Alphabet Inc.'s Google in the late 90s.

"It is both true that AI will transform the economy, and I think it will, like the internet, create huge amounts of economic value in the future," Taylor said. "I think we're also in a bubble, and a lot of people will lose a lot of money."

Amazon Chairman Jeff Bezos said the spending on AI resembles an "industrial bubble" akin to the biotech bubble of the 1990s, but he still expects it to improve the productivity of "every company in the world."

There are also some key differences to the dot-com boom that market watchers point out, the first being the broad health and stability of the biggest businesses that are at the forefront of the trend. Most of the "Magnificent Seven" group of U.S. tech companies are long-established giants that make up much of the earnings growth in the S&P 500 Index. These firms have huge revenue streams and are sitting on large stockpiles of cash.

Despite the skepticism, AI adoption has also proceeded at a rapid clip. OpenAI's ChatGPT has about 700 million weekly users, making it one of the fastest growing consumer products in history. Top AI developers, including OpenAI and Anthropic, have also seen remarkably strong sales growth. OpenAI previously forecast revenue would more than triple in 2025 to $12.7 billion. While the company does not expect to be cash-flow positive until near the end of this decade, a recent deal to help employees sell shares gave it an implied valuation of $500 billion – making it the world's most valuable company never to have turned a profit.

FOCUS

Inside the high-stakes battle over vaccine injury compensation, autism and public trust

By CÉLINE GOUNDER
KFF Health News (TNS)

Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has floated a seismic idea: adding autism to the list of conditions covered by the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program. The program, known as VICP, provides a system for families to file claims against vaccine providers in cases in which they experience severe side effects. Kennedy has also suggested broadening the definitions of two serious brain conditions – encephalopathy and encephalitis – so that autism cases could qualify.

Either move, experts warn, would unleash a flood of claims, threatening the program's financial stability and handing vaccine opponents a powerful new talking point.

Legally, HHS "is required to undergo notice and comment rulemaking to revise the table," said Richard Hughes, a law firm partner who teaches at George Washington University. The "table" is a list of specific injuries that the U.S. government accepts as presumed to be caused by a vaccine if those injuries occur within a certain time window. If someone can show they meet the criteria, they have a simpler path to securing compensation without having to prove fault. Autism is not in the table because a link between vaccines and autism has been thoroughly debunked.

If autism is added, Hughes explained, the VICP could face "an exorbitant number of claims that would threaten the viability of the program."

Asked about its possible plans, an HHS spokesperson told CBS News the agency does not comment on future or potential policy decisions.

Carole Johnson, former administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration, which oversees VICP, cautioned that the system is already overburdened: "The backlog is not just a function of management, it's built into the statute itself. That's important context for any conversation about adding new categories of claims."

Dorit Reiss, a law professor at the University of California College of the Law-San Francisco, said that any such change would be exploited: "This can, and likely will, be used to cast doubt on vaccines."

Compensation without causation

The Vaccine Injury Compensation Program was born of crisis. In 1982, " Vaccine Roulette," a television documentary, aired nationwide, alleging routine childhood shots were causing seizures, brain damage, and even sudden infant death. The program alarmed parents and triggered a surge of lawsuits against vaccine makers.

"That led to a flood of litigation against vaccine makers," recalled Paul Offit, a pediatric infectious disease specialist and vaccine inventor at the University of Pennsylvania. "I mean, to the point that it drove them out of the business. … By the mid-1980s, there were $3.2 billion worth of lawsuits against these companies."

Were it not for the VICP, Offit said, "We wouldn't have vaccines for American children. The companies – it wasn't worth it for them."

The National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986 created a no-fault system. Families who believed a vaccine caused harm could file a claim; if the injury appeared on the table within a set time frame, compensation was automatic. If not, claimants could present medical evidence. The system had two purposes: provide compensation and protect the vaccine supply.

From the beginning, the table was understood not as a scientific document but as a legal tool.

"It's a legal document and things can be included for policy reasons even if the causation evidence is weak," Reiss said. She explained, "The program is designed to be generous, to compensate in cases of doubt."

But, she said, "autism is not in that category. The science is clear. Adding it would be pure politics."

Win McNamee / Getty Images / TNS

U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr is interviewed on FOX News outside of the White House West Wing on Sept. 9 in Washington, D.C.

This tension – between law, science, and public perception – has defined the program for nearly four decades.

What expansion would mean in practice

Since 1988, federal data shows more than 25,000 petitions to the VICP have been adjudicated; of those, 12,019 were granted compensation and 13,007 were dismissed. About 60 percent of compensated cases involved negotiated settlements in which HHS drew no conclusion about the cause. Over the same period, billions of vaccine doses were safely administered to millions of Americans.

Adding autism to the VICP table would change that picture overnight.

Federal estimates suggest up to 48,000 children could qualify immediately under a "profound autism" standard, with potential payouts averaging $2 million per case, at an initial cost of nearly $100 billion, followed by annual totals of about $30 billion a year – dwarfing the current $4 billion trust, a new analysis finds.

"Any case where the symptoms appeared in the past eight years and the parents blame vaccines," Reiss said. "I don't know how many that would be. The fund has a surplus of over $4 billion. One seriously disabled child's care can cost millions, so a significant number, say 100,000 compensations, might exhaust it."

Furthermore, with only eight special masters handling cases, the system would also be paralyzed by backlogs.

The stakes are not just fiscal. If the fund collapses under the weight of autism claims, vaccine makers may question whether producing vaccines for the U.S. market is worth the risk. That would mirror the crisis of the 1980s, which led to the establishment of the VICP.

Autism and the courts

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Andrew Wakefield's now-retracted paper alleging a link between the MMR vaccine and autism fueled a surge of VICP claims. By 2002, the VICP was swamped with petitions alleging vaccines had caused autism. The court consolidated thousands of cases into the Omnibus Autism Proceedings, selecting a handful of test cases to decide them all.

After years of hearings and expert testimony, the conclusion was unequivocal: vaccines do not cause autism. In 2010, the court ruled against petitioners on every theory of causation. The U.S. Court of Federal Claims affirmed, and the Court of Appeals upheld, the decision.

"That precedent is binding," said Richard Hughes, a vaccine law expert at George Washington University and former VICP legal counsel. "Autism was litigated thoroughly and rejected. That still carries weight in the court today."

Yet, the vaccine-autism debate has never quite faded. In 2008, the government conceded a case involving Hannah Poling, a girl with a rare mitochondrial disorder who developed autism-like symptoms after vaccination. Officials stressed the concession was specific to her condition, not evidence of a general link. But headlines told another story: "Family to Receive $1.5 Million in First-Ever Vaccine Autism Court Award."

"Vaccinations ... happened around the time families were recognizing symptoms of autism in their children. However, we now know that autism begins much earlier, likely as the fetus develops during pregnancy, so it cannot be an explanation."

CATHERINE LORD
UCLA clinical psychologist and specialist in autism diagnosis

The Poling case fueled years of confusion.

Autism science today

The science is clearer than ever. Autism begins early in pregnancy, not in toddlerhood when most vaccines are given.

"Vaccinations … happened around the time families were recognizing symptoms of autism in their children," said Catherine Lord, a UCLA clinical psychologist and specialist in autism diagnosis. "However, we now know that autism begins much earlier, likely as the fetus develops during pregnancy, so it cannot be an explanation."

Peter Hotez, a pediatric infectious disease specialist and vaccine scientist at the Baylor College of Medicine who is also the father of a young adult with autism, underscores that point: "The drivers of autism are genetics and, in rare cases, environmental exposures during pregnancy, not vaccines. We've been over this ground for decades, and the evidence is overwhelming."

Sarah Despres, former legal counsel to the secretary of Health and Human Services in the Biden administration and now a consultant to nonprofit organizations on immunization policy, adds that the compensation program itself is often misunderstood.

"The table was originally written as a political document," she said. "The purpose of the program was to be swift, generous, and fair. … There would be cases that may not be caused by the vaccine but would be compensated if you went through this table injury scheme, where you don't have to prove causation."

What's at risk: Harm from the diseases themselves

The stakes are not abstract. Measles, one of the most contagious pathogens on Earth, spreads so efficiently that one infected child can transmit it to 90 percent of susceptible contacts. Before vaccinations began in the 1960s, measles sickened hundreds of thousands annually in the U.S., killing hundreds and causing thousands of cases of encephalitis and lifelong disability. Complications included pneumonia, brain swelling, and, in rare cases, a fatal degenerative brain disorder called subacute sclerosing panencephalitis, or SSPE, that can strike years later. This year, a school-age child in Los Angeles County died of SSPE after contracting measles in infancy, before being eligible for vaccination.

Mumps was once a near-universal childhood illness. Though often dismissed as mild, it can cause sterility in men, meningitis, and permanent hearing loss. Outbreaks on college campuses, as recently as the 2000s, showed how quickly it can return when vaccination rates slip.

Rubella, also known as German measles, is mild in most children, but can be devastating during pregnancy. Congenital Rubella Syndrome, or CRS, caused waves of tragedy before the development of the vaccine: Thousands of babies each year were born blind, deaf, with heart defects, or with intellectual disabilities. In medical texts, autism itself is listed as one of CRS' sequelae, or possible consequences – proof that rubella infection, not vaccination, can contribute to developmental disorders.

Measles, mumps, and rubella "are not trivial," said Walt Orenstein, former head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's immunization program. "Fever, high fever, is common … and they have frequent complications."

And yet, as these diseases fade from living memory, a counter-narrative has gained traction. On Sept. 29, the nonprofit Physicians for Informed Consent, a group that disputes the scientific consensus on vaccines, announced it had mailed its "Silver Booklet" on vaccine safety to every member of Congress, as well as to President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance. The book claims that "vaccines are not proven to be safer than the diseases they intend to prevent," and calls on federal leaders to punish states that restrict vaccine exemptions. (The booklet isn't free. The group sells copies for $25 on Amazon.)

Scientists say this framing misrepresents the basic math of risk. "Measles is one of the most important infectious diseases in human history," notes " Plotkin's Vaccines," the field's authoritative textbook. "The widespread use of measles vaccines in the late 20th and early 21st centuries led to a further marked reduction in measles deaths. Measles vaccination averted an estimated 31.7 million deaths from 2000 to 2020."

Kennedy's possible move to expand the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program hinges on casting doubt – on suggesting that science is unsettled, that vaccines may be riskier than diseases.

"One tactic used to argue that vaccines cause autism is the use of compensation decisions from the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program to claim such a link," said Reiss of UC Law-San Francisco. "Even the cases that most closely address the question of vaccines and autism do not show the link that opponents claim exists, and many of the cases used are misrepresented and misused."

Offit underscores the danger on the perception side. "When people see the Vaccine Injury Compensation program, they assume that any money that is given is because there was a vaccine injury," he said.

Kathryn Edwards, an expert in pediatric infectious diseases and vaccine safety at Vanderbilt University, said, "Expanding compensation for issues that are not clearly related to vaccines … suggests that these conditions are related to vaccines when they are not." She compared it to the removal of thimerosal, a preservative dropped from most childhood vaccines to ease public fears, despite no evidence of harm. "Now, we are still suffering from that action."

Public health experts stress that such narratives invert reality. The very diseases being downplayed once killed or disabled tens of thousands of American children each year. As pediatrician, psychiatrist, and medical historian Howard Markel put it: "Back a hundred years ago, everybody lost a kid or knew a kid who died of one of these diseases. … We never conquer germs, we wrestle them to a draw. That's the best we do. And so this is a real … handicap to the other side, the microbes who live to infect."

Families and the future

The hardest voices to reckon with are those of families. Parents of autistic children often feel abandoned – unsupported by disability programs, exhausted by care needs, searching for answers. Kennedy's appeal to them is emotional, not scientific.

Reiss noted that families deserve far more support but argues that it shouldn't come through VICP.

"The program is to award compensation to those injured by vaccines," she said. "We should have more direct support – disability funding, disability aid. Kennedy has been taking HHS in the opposite direction, cutting services where we need more."

Despres made the same point: "The goal of the program really was if there's a close call, we're going to err on the side of compensation. … And it's really important that everyone understands that compensation does not mean that the vaccine actually caused the injury. … And I think we have seen statistics around the compensation program misused by those who would want to sow distrust in vaccines, to say vaccines are unsafe, when in fact … that's not what this is."

UCLA's Lord urged a shift in focus. "For the last 50 years, science has focused on the biological causes of autism, which has led to great progress, especially in genetics," she said. Of Secretary Kennedy, she said, "He could help more by acknowledging the value of science, but also the need to better attend to the actual lives of autistic people and their families."

What comes next?

If Kennedy decides to move forward with such a plan, HHS would need to draft a rule, open it to public comment, and then defend the change in court. The pushback will be fierce: from scientists, from public health leaders, and from families who fear being misled yet again.

The debate over adding autism to the Vaccine Injury Table is not just a policy debate. The program was built on the principle of compensation without causation, a fragile balance designed to sustain both trust and supply. Adding autism could collapse that distinction entirely.

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

FOCUS

School systems are remaking the old yellow bus into a high-tech machine

By KEVIN HARDY
Stateline.org (TNS)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — A transplant from Miami, Anallive Calle learned her way around Kansas City from behind the wheel of a big yellow school bus.

The tablet near the dash provides turn-by-turn directions to every stop and checks each kid on and off the bus throughout her route. It's helped her navigate the narrow roads and one-ways that stretch through one of the city's oldest neighborhoods.

And from her phone, she can check on the status of her own son and whether he made the bus each morning and afternoon.

"So it's transparent all the way," she said. "You know when your child is picked up and where they're at every moment."

Last school year, Kansas City Public Schools started a new transportation contract with Zum, a company that provides busing services for districts across the country.

With the new vendor, drivers welcomed updates like air conditioning and tinted windows that keep the new fleet comfortable. But they also were given a suite of new technology – a main driver of the 15,000-student urban school district's decision to ink a $100 million, 5-year contract with Zum.

Aside from navigation, the buses are loaded with live cameras inside and out. Checking in at the tablet allows parents to track their kids and schools to get a headcount on that day's breakfast and lunch. From the bus barn's dispatch office, a large screen shows the location of each bus, its exact speed, whether it's running on time – and even the driver's rating from parents.

Derrick Gines, a Zum driver and safety trainer with 10 years of experience, said the technology built into today's buses make drivers and students safer.

"Versus yesteryear, they were designed for freight – human freight," he said. "But now, there's so much safety wrapped around this thing."

While the iconic yellow buses might look like those of yore, school systems big and small are increasingly investing in a new wave of on-board technology.

New software programs monitor engine components, alerting transportation departments to maintenance needs. Other tools create the most optimal routes, saving on fuel, staff and bus costs. Turn-by-turn navigation and student manifests help ensure that no driver is lost and no kid is left behind. And live video feeds can help with student behavior issues – even allowing a school principal to speak to students on the bus in real time, in some cases.

This newfangled technology is a stark contrast to the machinery and aesthetics of the yellow bus, which have remained largely unchanged for decades, said Ryan Gray, editor-in-chief of School Transportation News, which covers the industry.

Photos by Kevin Hardy / Stateline / TNS

ABOVE: Anallive Calle and Derrick Gines show the technological features inside a bus operated by Zum, a contractor for Kansas City Public Schools in Kansas City, Missouri. School systems across the country are increasingly equipping buses with technology that provides live camera feeds and real-time student tracking for parents. **BOTTOM:** Buses are lined up at the Kansas City Public Schools bus barn in Kansas City, Missouri, between morning and afternoon routes. Zum, which operates the buses for the school system, has equipped its fleet with many high-tech features that are proving popular with drivers and parents.

"Even when you walk onto a school bus, it still looks the same," he said. "But the inner workings have just completely changed. All of the advanced electronics in it – the wiring to make all of this technology work, whether it be the hardware or the software – it's grown by leaps and bounds."

Schools see some of these technologies as intuitive progress: Technology has reshaped many other facets of public education, while many bus drivers were stuck with paper maps and CB radios. But with the rise of new technology comes new risks, and some advocates are cautious about the security of all the data flowing through yellow buses.

A booming market of vendors and limited regulations on bus tech has given more responsibility to school IT and transportation departments. But Gray said most school districts are embracing these new tools – if they can afford them.

"It always comes down to money," he said. "I think that if they think they have the money, they're going to want to buy this stuff.

School systems and tech companies say these tools can improve student safety, create efficiencies and help alleviate the chronic shortage of bus drivers.

"It's a huge recruiting tool," said Jason Salmons, transportation director for Bentonville Schools in northwest Arkansas.

Bentonville contracts with Transportant, a Kansas-based company, to equip its buses with new camera and tracking technology. Salmons said the navigation and student tracking provide peace of mind to drivers, who can easily traverse new neighborhoods. The seven live cameras on each bus also provide security if an incident arises.

About 13,000 of the district's 20,000 students ride buses across 135 daily routes. In addition to an upfront cost, he said the school system pays a subscription of about $90,000 per year.

The software tracks not only every bus, but also every student's boarding and disembarkment, even taking photos of the kids. If something happens, law enforcement can see where a child was and what they were wearing at dropoff – providing a "priceless" service, Salmons said.

With real-time tracking – much like a rideshare customer would see on their screen – parents and students view buses as more reliable, he said. With more precise pickup times, students don't wait outside in the cold as long and older kids can even get a few more minutes of sleep, Salmons said.

"High schoolers use the app as their bible," he said.

Data privacy

Given the national driver shortage and parents' focus on reliability, Cassie Creswell understands the appeal of the new bus technology. But she has concerns about the growing loads of data being collected.

"It's a mixed bag on this stuff," said Creswell, the co-chair of the national Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, which advocates to protect student data.

That group has pushed to keep cameras out of classrooms, but hasn't taken a formal position on school buses, she said. Creswell, a parent of a Chicago Public Schools student, said the more data that is collected – such as GPS locations and video footage – the more opportunities for that data to be sold or illicitly breached.

"Are we actually clearing away stuff that you really shouldn't hold on to forever?" she asked. "We're so careless with student data – even very sensitive data – and we're very careless about the long-term protection of that data."

School systems interviewed by Stateline said their bus data is being securely stored separately from other student records and that data such as videos are routinely deleted.

Alan Fairless, a founder and chief technology officer of the tech provider Transportant, previously worked in building encrypted tech products.

He said the company doesn't sell any student data and encrypts the memory of each device – so, someone stealing a tablet off a bus would have no access to its memory. The company was created in 2018 to tackle parent and school concerns about bus reliability and delays.

Fairless said he quickly learned many districts struggle with high driver turnover because of student behavior issues on board.

By providing multiple cameras that can be accessed live, he said, the company's product provides a new layer of support to drivers.

"Now, when something happens, they push a button and a dispatcher or principal is going to watch that bus in real time," he said.

Fairless said one school district has what it calls a seven-minute rule: When a driver alerts of an incident, a dispatcher aims to watch the video, figure out what happened and notify parents over text or phone call within seven minutes.

"The effect is, that video arrives to the parents, and now they know the real problem, and they know that before the student comes home and creates some other version of the story," he said. "So now, it's like the parents and the school district are working together to solve the problem."

Since launching, the company has contracted with 88 school systems in 19 states to provide its all-inclusive tech suite that includes the app for families, on-board Wi-Fi, camera systems and routing services.

While prices can vary, school districts typically pay about $3,600 per bus up front and an annual subscription cost of about $69 per bus, said Jeff Shackelford, vice president of sales.

Changing parent demands

The addition of Transportant has helped keep parents informed in Oregon's Estacada School District, which sprawls across 750 square miles southeast of Portland.

"It's been great customer service for our families to just see, just like when someone orders an Uber, they can keep track of where their kid is at," said Maggie Kelly, a spokesperson for the school system of about 2,000 students.

Kelly said the district expects to make up some of its initial investment in the technology as it realizes savings from more efficient bus routes.

Parents are demanding more real-time information on bus times and locations, said Rick D'Errico, a spokesperson for Transfinder, whose products build more efficient bus routes and provide tracking apps for parents.

"If I can track a burrito order, why can't I track a bus?" D'Errico said. "Parents these days expect their districts to have ways to notify them on individualized ETAs and alerts for when their kid is on their routes, and not rely on schoolwide email blasts."

Recently, school districts in Alaska, Texas and Wyoming have launched the company's apps, which are free for parents.

Such services can provide savings by cutting back on the number of drivers and buses in operation. But they also relieve pressure on dispatchers, who can be besieged with parent phone calls during disruptions or delays.

Since rolling out a new bus tracking app this year, the St. Johns County School District in northeast Florida has fielded far fewer parent calls.

That app is just the latest addition to a portfolio of advanced onboard technology, said Jonah Paxton, transportation fleet technology foreman at the district, which serves about 27,000 bus riders.

The 52,000-student school system intentionally purchased separate products for bus cameras, parent tracking and driver navigation. Paxton said that allows the school system to avoid getting stuck with a single provider that could demand higher prices in the future.

"We're not locked into a single sort of a walled-garden of products, which gives us a lot more freedom to pick and choose which products we like, which ones we don't like, and gives us a little more negotiating power," he said.

To ensure security, the school system stores video files on its own servers rather than those of outside vendors, he said. The district has a specific video retention policy and it blurs out student faces if videos are ever requested under the state's public records law.

Paxton said student and driver safety drives many of the tech decisions for the school's fleet of more than 300 buses.

"Buses are vastly different than they were even five,10 years ago," he said. "I think many people who haven't ridden a bus in a while can think of the bus as sort of an unpleasant place, or kind of the Wild West of schooling, but they've really come a long way."

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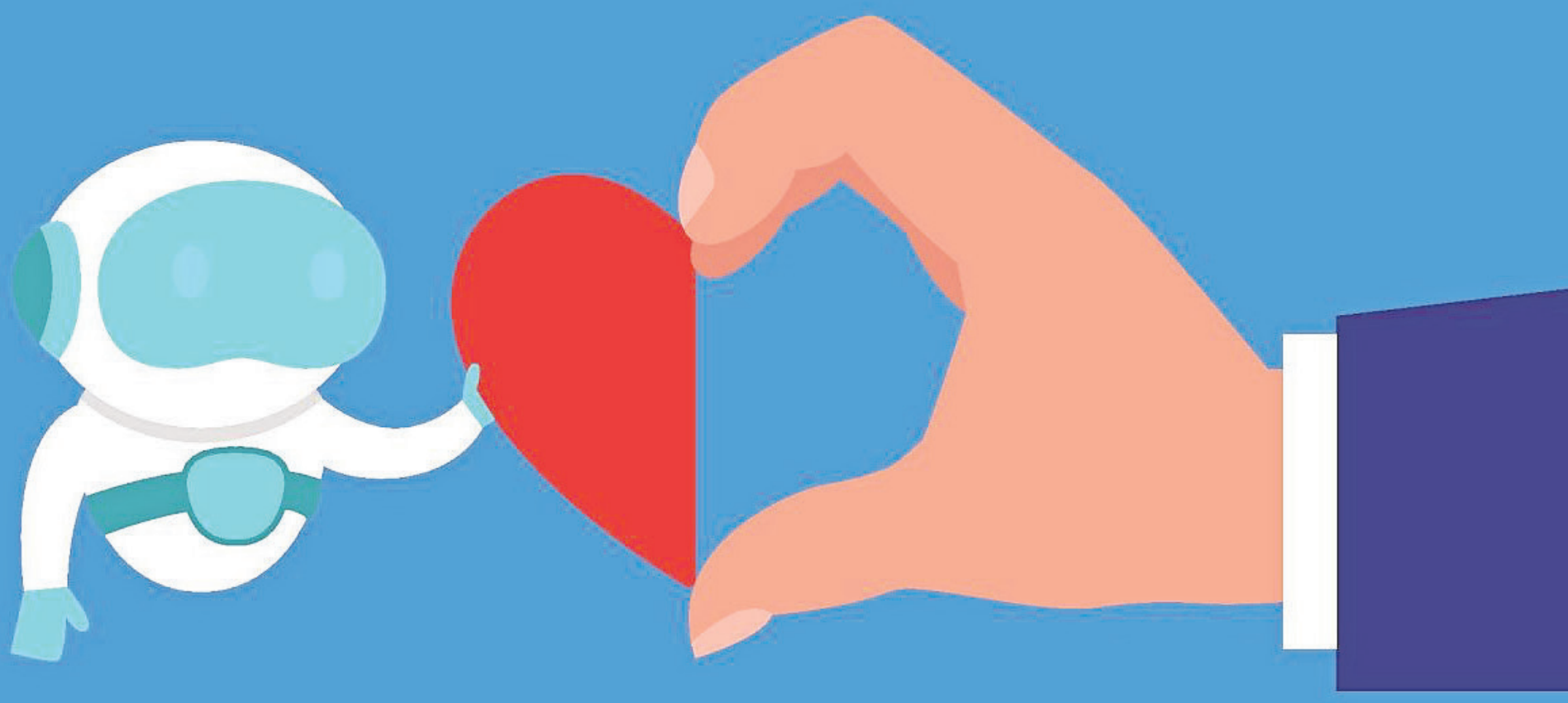
FOCUS



How VR and AI could help the next generation grow kinder and more connected

By EKATERINA MURAVEVSKAIA
Assistant Professor of Human-Centered Computing, Indiana University (The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

Empathy is not just a "nice-to-have" soft skill – it is a foundation of how children and adults regulate emotions, build friendships and learn from one another.

Between the ages of 6 and 9, children begin shifting from being self-centered to noticing the emotions and perspectives of others. This makes early childhood one of the most important periods for developing empathy and other social-emotional skills.

Traditionally, pretend play has been a natural way to practice empathy. Many adults can remember acting out scenes as doctor and patient, or using sticks and leaves as imaginary currency. Those playful moments were not just entertainment – they were early lessons in empathy and taking someone else's perspective.

But as children spend more time with technology and less in pretend play, these opportunities are shrinking. Some educators worry that technology is hindering social-emotional learning. Yet research in affective computing – digital systems that recognize emotions, simulate them or both – suggests that technology can also become part of the solution.

Virtual reality, in particular, can create immersive environments where children interact with characters who display emotions as vividly as real humans. I'm a human-computer interaction scientist who studies social-emotional learning in the context of how people use technology. Used thoughtfully, the combination of VR and artificial intelligence could help reshape social-emotional learning practices and serve as a new kind of "empathy classroom" or "emotional regulation simulator."

Game of emotions

As a part of my doctoral studies at the University of Florida, in 2017 I began developing a VR Empathy Game framework that combines insights from developmental psychology, affective computing and participatory design with children. At the Human-Computer Interaction Lab at the University of Maryland, I worked with their KidsTeam program, where children of 7-11 served as design partners, helping us to imagine what an empathy-focused VR game should feel like.

In 2018, 15 master's students at the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy at the University of Central Florida and I created the first game prototype, Why Did Baba Yaga Take My Brother? This game is based on a Russian folktale and introduces four characters, each representing a core emotion: Baba Yaga embodies anger, Goose represents fear, the Older Sister shows happiness and the Younger Sister expresses sadness.

Unlike most games, it does not reward players with points or badges. Instead, children can progress in the game only by getting to know the characters, listening to their stories and practicing empathic actions. For example, they can look at the game's world through a character's glasses, revisit their memories or even hug Baba Yaga to comfort her. This design choice reflects a core idea of social-emotional learning: Empathy is not about external rewards but about pausing, reflecting and responding to the needs of others.

My colleagues and I have been refining the game since then and using it to study children and empathy.

Different paths to empathy

We tested the game with elementary school children individually. After asking general questions and giving an empathy survey, we invited children to play the game. We observed their behavior while they were playing and discussed their experience afterward.

Our most important discovery was that children interacted with the VR characters following the main empathic patterns humans usually follow while interacting with each other. Some children displayed cognitive empathy, meaning they had an understanding of the characters' emotional states. They listened thoughtfully to characters, tapped their shoulders to get their attention, and attempted to help them. At the same time, they were not completely absorbed in the VR characters' feelings.

Others expressed emotional contagion, directly mirroring characters' emotions, sometimes becoming so distressed by fear or sadness that it made them stop the game. In addition, a few other children did not connect with the characters at all, focusing mainly on exploring the virtual environment. All three behaviors can happen in real life as well when children interact with their peers.

These findings highlight both the promise and the challenge. VR can indeed evoke powerful empathic responses, but it also raises questions about how to design experiences that support children with different temperaments – some need more stimulation, and others need gentler pacing.

AI eye on emotions

The current big question for us is how to effectively incorporate this type of empathy game into everyday life. In classrooms, VR will not replace real conversations or traditional role-play, but it can enrich them. A teacher might use a short VR scenario to spark discussion, encouraging students to reflect on what they felt and how it connects to their real friendships. In this way, VR becomes a springboard for dialogue, not a stand-alone tool.

We are also exploring adaptive VR systems that respond to a child's emotional state in real time. A headset might detect if a child is anxious or scared – through facial expressions, heart rate or gaze – and adjust the experience by scaling down the characters' expressiveness or offering supportive prompts. Such a responsive "empathy classroom" could give children safe opportunities to gradually strengthen their emotional regulation skills.

This is where AI becomes essential. AI systems can make sense of the data collected by VR headsets such as eye gaze, facial expressions, heart rate or body movement and use it to adjust the experience in real time. For example, if a child looks anxious or avoids eye contact with a sad character, the AI could gently slow down the story, provide encouraging prompts or reduce the emotional intensity of the scene. On the other hand, if the child appears calm and engaged, the AI might introduce a more complex scenario to deepen their learning.

In our current research, we are investigating how AI can measure empathy itself – tracking moment-to-moment emotional responses during gameplay to provide educators with better insight into how empathy develops.

Future work and collaboration

As promising as I believe this work is, it raises big questions. Should VR characters express emotions at full intensity, or should we tone them down for sensitive children? If children treat VR characters as real, how do we make sure those lessons carry to the playground or dinner table? And with headsets still costly, how do we ensure empathy technology doesn't widen digital divides?

These are not just research puzzles but ethical responsibilities. This vision requires collaboration among educators, researchers, designers, parents and children themselves. Computer scientists design the technology, psychologists ensure the experiences are emotionally healthy, teachers adapt them for curriculum, and children co-create the games to make them engaging and meaningful.

Together, we can shape technologies that not only entertain but also nurture empathy, emotional regulation and deeper connection in the next generation.

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FOCUS

Photos by Lloyd Fox / The Baltimore Sun / TNS

Daryl Davis holds robes worn by former Grand Dragons from the KKK. In his left hand he holds the Baltimore City police uniform of a former officer who was a KKK leader in Maryland.

'Klan Whisperer'

How one Maryland man helped 200 white supremacists change

By RUBEN CASTANEDA
The Baltimore Sun (TNS)

BALTIMORE — Daryl Davis, 67, started trying to talk white supremacists out of hating people like him when he was 10.

In his 2024 book, "The Klan Whisperer," Davis, an R&B and blues pianist and guitarist, describes his encounters with Klan members and other racists during the past five decades. Over the years, more than 200 white supremacists have left their hate groups after meeting with him, according to Davis, who is Black and lives in Maryland.

As a young man, he played with a country and bluegrass band at the Silver Dollar Lounge in Frederick. Many of the patrons were "rough country types," and "racial violence could erupt if Black men were present," Davis wrote in his book. "Over time, I was accepted by the white patrons who didn't perceive me as threatening. I became well-liked mostly because I was a musician."

Eventually, Davis became friendly with a man named Hank, a Klansman who frequented the Silver Dollar. Every six weeks, Hank would show up with fellow Klansmen and Klanswomen to watch him perform.

"I would meet some of the Klan members on my break, while others did not want to meet me but would enjoy watching me and dancing to my music," Davis wrote.

In an interview with The Baltimore Sun, Davis said the United States is at a crossroads regarding race relations. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you start doing your anti-racism work, what you call your pro-human work?

I was born in Chicago; my parents were from Virginia, and my father worked in the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service. So I grew up as a U.S. embassy kid, traveling around the world.

I attended a newly integrated school in Massachusetts in 1968. Several of my friends were in the Cub Scouts, and they invited me to join, and I did. We had a parade from Lexington to Concord to commemorate the ride of Paul Revere.

I was the only Black participant, and the streets were blocked off. The sidewalks were filled with white people walking, cheering, and having a good time. We reached a point in the parade route when suddenly I was getting pelted by rocks and bottles and soda pop cans, by a small group of spectators off to my right, on the sidewalk.

I looked over and saw a couple of kids and a couple of adults, who I assume were their parents. My scout leaders came running and covered me with their own bodies.

What did your parents say?

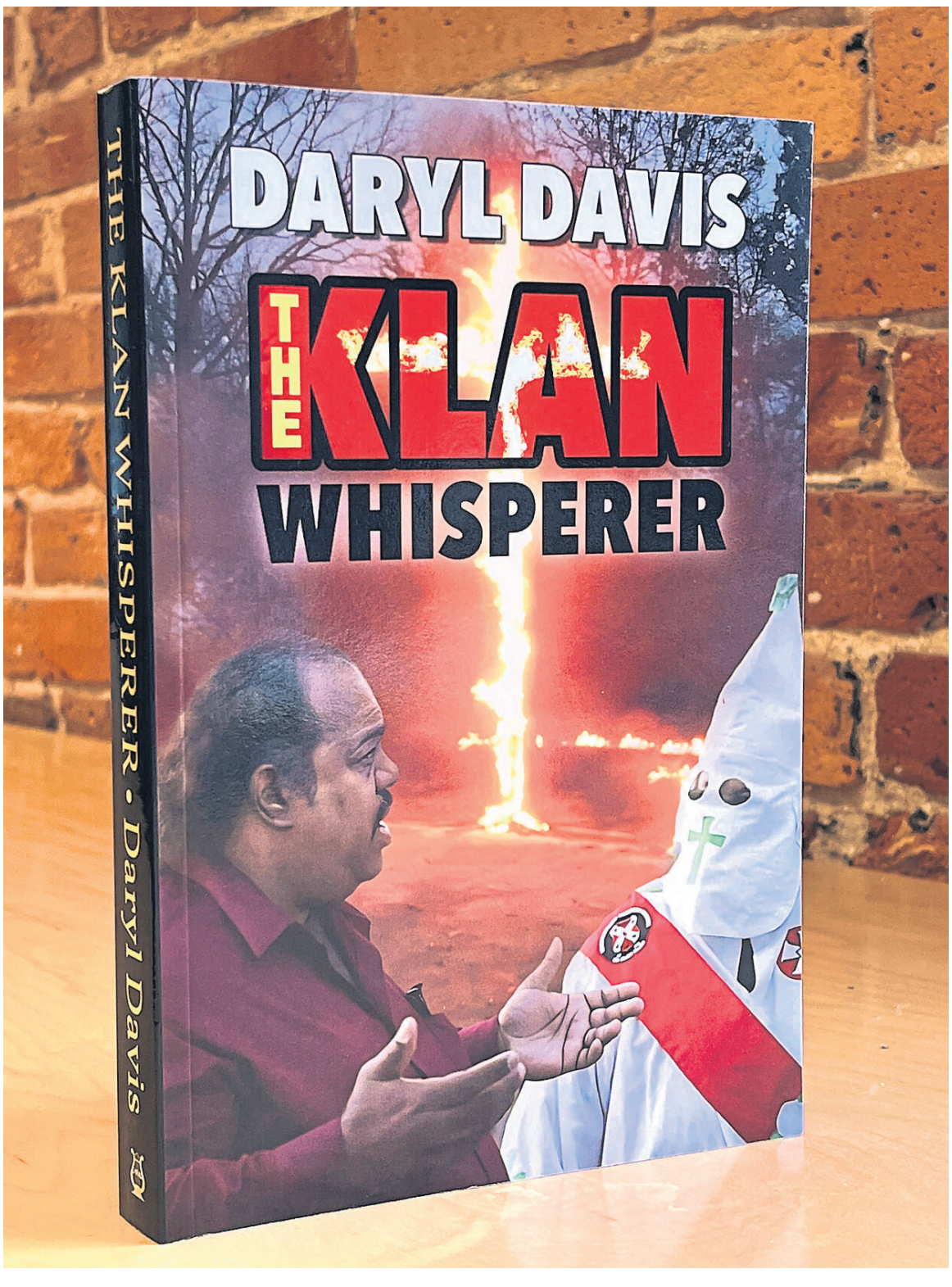
They asked me, 'How did I get all scraped up?' I told them exactly what had happened. For the first time in my life, my mother and father sat me down at age 10 and explained to me what racism was. When they were explaining it to me, I was incredulous; my 10-year-old brain could not process the idea that someone who had never seen me, spoken to me, or knew anything about me would want to hurt me for no other reason than the color of my skin. It just made no sense.

[That] was 1968, and Dr. [Martin Luther] King was assassinated, and every major city in this country burned to the ground. It was destruction and violence, all in the name of this new word I had learned. I formed this question in my mind: How can you hate me if you don't even know me? For the next 57 years, I've been looking for the answer to that question.

What effect has the emergence of Donald Trump as a political figure and as president had on white hate groups?

Donald Trump did not invent racism. However, Donald Trump has given racists carte blanche to operate freely upon their ideology. Not everybody who voted for Donald Trump is a racist. But every racist voted for Donald Trump. And I would say that Donald Trump is the best thing that's happened to this country. I don't mean to say he's a good person or that he's done great things for the country. When I say he's the best thing, he has brought racism to the forefront. Until him, people were trying to turn a blind eye to it. "Oh, we had a Black president, racism is over now."

Because of Donald Trump, we can no longer turn a blind eye, because everywhere you look, it's there. We can no longer ignore it. I see it as a wakeup call to this country if … wants to survive."



Daryl Davis engages KKK members and has persuaded some to leave the organization and renounce their racist ideology. He is also a musician. His book, The Klan Whisperer, was published in December 2024.

How active are the KKK and other white supremacist groups in Maryland and the greater DMV area?

They are not very active in Maryland. Roger Kelly [the former Grand Dragon, or state leader, of the KKK in Maryland] had the largest Klan group in Maryland; he got out, and we became very good friends. He rethought his ideology based on a lot of things that I was telling him, and he left the Klan and shut it down. Then another fellow tried to pick up the mantle, and he got in some trouble and was quickly shut down in Sharpsburg. You have several chapters of the Klan in Virginia. I know those people. Delaware, there are a couple of chapters there.

What do KKK members think of the Smithsonian Museum?

I took a KKK leader there around 2018 and showed him around. He thought it was fascinating. He thought it should have more Confederate history in it.

What types of jobs do people in white supremacist groups hold?

A Klansman, a Klanswoman, a white supremacist of any affiliation, whether neo-Nazi, Proud Boy, Patriot Front, whatever, is not stamped out of a standard cookie-cutter. They come from all walks of life, all socioeconomic backgrounds, and levels of education. They go from a third-grade dropout that you see on "Jerry Springer" or "Geraldo" throwing chairs on the stage, all the way to the president of the United States. President Warren G. Harding was sworn into the Ku Klux Klan in the green room of the White House. Harry Truman joined the Klan for a very short time. He got out and went on to become president. Hugo Black was in the Klan in Alabama when he got the Supreme Court appointment. Some work at the White House, some work pumping gas. Some are schoolteachers, people who work in grocery stores, or in a police department.

How do you get white supremacists to reconsider their beliefs?

Generally, I meet with them one-on-one, and I don't like to say that I convert anybody. I will say that I am the impetus for them to convert themselves. You've heard the expression that one's perception is one's reality, and that's so true. Whatever someone perceives becomes their reality. You cannot change someone's reality. If you try to change it, you'll get pushback. What you want to do is offer them a better perception or perceptions. And if one resonates with one of those perceptions, they will change their own reality.

HEALTH

mphillips007
Hot wings, nachos, pigs in a blanket, beer, and popcorn, a tailgate party spread. Please see my portfolio for other food and drink images.

Wings, booze & HEARTBREAK

Research suggests that sports fandom has hidden costs

By AARON MANSFIELD
Merrimack College (The Conversation)

Being from Buffalo means getting to eat some of the best wings in the world. It means scraping snow and ice off your car in frigid mornings. And it means making a lifelong vow to the city's NFL franchise, the Bills – for better or worse, till death do us part.

When I grew up in New York's second-largest city, my community was bound together by loyalty to a football team that always found new ways to break our hearts. And yet at the start of each NFL season, we always found reasons to hope – we couldn't help ourselves.

Coming from this football-crazed culture, I often wondered about the psychology of fandom. This eventually led me to pursue a Ph.D. in sport consumer behavior. As a doctoral student, I was most interested in one question: Is fandom good for us?

I found a huge body of research on the psychological and social effects of fandom, and it certainly made being devoted to a team look good. Fandom builds belonging, helps adults make friends, boosts happiness and even provides a buffer against traumatic life events.

So, fandom is great, right?

As famed football commentator Lee Corso would say: "Not so fast, my friend."

While fandom appears to be a boon for our mental health, strikingly little research had been conducted on the relationship between fandom and physical health.

So I decided to conduct a series of studies – mainly of people in Western countries – on this topic. I found that being a sports fan can have some drawbacks for physical health, especially among the most committed fans.

Reach for the nachos

Playing sports is healthy. But watching them? Not so much.

Tailgating culture revolves around alcohol. Research shows that college sports fans binge drink at significantly higher rates than nonfans, are more likely to do something they later regretted and are more likely to drive drunk. Meanwhile, watch parties encourage being stationary for hours and mindlessly snacking. And, of course, fandom goes hand in hand with heavily processed foods like wings, nachos, pizza and hot dogs.

One fan told me that when watching games, his relationship with food is "almost Pavlovian"; he craves "decadent" foods the same way he seeks out popcorn at the movies.

Inside the stadium, healthy options have traditionally been scarce and overpriced. A Sports Illustrated writer joked in 1966 that fans leave stadiums and arenas with "the same body chemistry as a jelly doughnut."

Little seems to have changed since. One Gen Z fan I recently interviewed griped, "You might find one salad with a plain piece of lettuce and a quarter of a tomato."

Eating away the anxiety and pain

The relationship between fandom and physical health isn't just about guzzling beer, sitting for hours on end or scarfing down hot dogs.

One study analyzed sales from grocery stores. The researchers found that fans consume more calories – and less healthy food – on the day following a loss by their favorite team, a reaction the researchers tied to stress and disappointment.

My colleagues and I found something similar: Fandom induces what's called "emotional eating."

Emotions like anger, sadness and disappointment lead to stronger cravings. And this relationship is tied to how your favorite team performs when it matters most. For example, we found that games between rivals and closely contested games yield more pronounced effects. Emotional states generated by the game are also significantly correlated with increased beer sales in the stadium.

High-calorie cultures

In another paper, my co-authors and I found that fans often feel torn between their desire to make healthy choices and their commitment to being a "true fan."

Every fan base develops its own culture. These unwritten rules vary from team to team, and they aren't just about wearing a cheesehead hat or waving a Terrible Towel. They also include expectations around drinking, eating and lifestyle.

These health-related norms are shaped by a variety of factors, including the region's culture, team history and even team sponsorships.

For example, the Cincinnati Bengals partner with Skyline Chili, a regional chain that makes a meat sauce that's often poured over hot dogs or spaghetti. One Bengals fan I interviewed observed that if you attend a Bengals game, sure, you could eat something else – but a "true fan" eats Skyline.

I have two studies in progress that show how hardcore fans typically align their health behaviors with the health norms of their fan base. This becomes a way to signal their allegiance to the team, improve their standing among fellow fans, and contribute to what makes the fan base distinct in the eyes of its members.

In Buffalo, for example, tailgating often revolves around alcohol – so much so that Bills fans have a reputation for over-the-top drinking rituals.

And in New Orleans, Saints fans often link fandom to Louisiana food traditions. As one fan explained: "People make a bunch of fried food or huge pots of gumbo or étouffée, and eat all day – from hours before the game until hours after."

A new generation of health-conscious fans

The fan experience is shaped by the culture in which it is embedded. Teams actively help shape these cultures, and there's a business argument to be had for teams to play a bigger role in changing some of these norms.

Gen Z is strikingly health-conscious. They're also less engaged with traditional fandom.

If stadiums and tailgates continue to revolve around beer and nachos, why would a generation attuned to fitness influencers and "fitspiration" buy in? To reach this market, I think the sports industry will need to promote its professional sports teams in new ways.

Some teams are already doing so. The British soccer team Liverpool has partnered with the exercise equipment company Peloton. Another club, Manchester City, has teamed up with a nonalcoholic beer brand as the official sponsor of its practice uniforms.

And several European soccer clubs have even joined a "Healthy Stadia" movement, revamping in-stadium food options and encouraging fans to walk and bike to the stadium.

For the record, I don't think the solution is replacing typical fan foods with smoothies and salads. Alienating core consumers is generally not a sound business strategy.

I think it's reasonable, however, to suggest sports teams might add more healthy options and carefully evaluate the signals they send through sponsorships.

As one fan I recently interviewed said: "The NFL has had half-assed efforts like Play 60" – a campaign encouraging kids to get at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day – "while also making a ton of money from beer, food and, back in the day, cigarette advertisements. How can sports leagues seriously expect people to be healthier if they promote unhealthy behaviors?"

Today's consumers want to support brands that reflect their values. This is particularly true for Gen Zers, many of whom are savvy enough to see through hollow campaigns and quick to reject hypocrisy. In the long run, I think this type of dissonance – sandwiching a Play 60 commercial between ads for Uber Eats and Anheuser-Busch – will prove counterproductive.

I, as much as anyone else, understand what makes fandom special – and yes, I've eaten my share of wings during Bills games. But public health is a pressing concern, and though the sports industry is well-positioned to address this issue, fandom isn't helping. Actually, my research suggests it's having the opposite effect.

Striking the balance I'm advocating will be tricky, but the sports industry is filled with bright problem-solvers. In the film "Moneyball," Brad Pitt's character, Billy Beane, famously says sports teams must "adapt or die." He was referring to the need for baseball teams to integrate analytics into their decision-making.

Professional sports teams eventually got that message. Maybe they'll get this one, too.

Aaron Mansfield is an assistant professor of sport management at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts.

A new therapy kickstarts immune response to cancer

By KARL HILLE
Baltimore Sun (TNS)

Cancer researchers with Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital successfully boosted immune response to cancer tissue in a study that could dramatically improve survival and prevent tumor relapse.

Malignant tumors are challenging to treat because they typically avoid detection by the body's immune system, preventing the immune response that would help fight the cancer. Researchers call this tendency immune-cold.

"We discovered that by activating a combination of two immune pathways, you can convert an 'immune-cold' tumor to an 'immune-hot' tumor," said Masanobu Komatsu, principal investigator of the study and senior scientist at the Johns Hopkins All Children's Cancer & Blood Disorders Institute.

"Only 20 to 30 percent of melanoma and lung cancer patients respond to immunotherapy," Komatsu said. "If you can help those other 70 percent of patients, you can effectively eliminate cancer."

Cancer occurs when changes to the genes that regulate cell functions cause the cell to malfunction, according to the National Cancer Institute, which funded the Johns Hopkins study, growing and dividing when they should not. While the immune system normally eliminates damaged or mutated cells, cancer cells hide from this defense, sometimes even co-opting the immune system to defend it instead.

The treatment enhanced the growth and effectiveness of immune hubs known as tertiary lymphoid structures (TLS) that recruit and guide immune cells to the tumor to fight cancer cells. These hubs also stick around after successful treatment and can keep the tumor from coming back.

Within these structures, they reported, immune B cells initiated reactions that generated more effective antibodies and longer-lived memory cells as well as other signs that indicated a durable immunity and a lower chance of relapse.

Currently, approved therapy exists to target one of the two immune pathways in their experiment, Komatsu said. They demonstrated they can activate both pathways in mouse models. Next, they will use human cell cultures to fine-tune both therapies in preparation for human clinical trials.

"By building the right immune infrastructure inside tumors, we can potentiate the patient's own defenses … against cancer growth, relapse, and metastasis," Komatsu said.

Visual Generation / Getty Images

Even small drops in vaccination rates for U.S. children can lead to disease outbreaks

By DAVID HIGGINS
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus
(The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

More than three-quarters of U.S. counties and jurisdictions are experiencing declines in childhood vaccination rates, a trend that began in 2019, according to a September 2025 NBC News–Stanford University investigation. The report also found a "large swath" of the U.S. no longer has the "basic, ground-level immunity" needed to stop the spread of measles.

Dr. David Higgins, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado CU Anschutz Medical Center and a pediatrician who researches vaccines, discusses the dangers of not vaccinating your children.

The Conversation has collaborated with SciLine to bring you highlights from the discussion, edited for brevity and clarity.

What vaccines are typically required for schoolchildren, and why?

David Higgins: The vaccine requirements for kids to attend school are set by states, not the federal government. Most states require kindergartners get vaccines for pertussis – that's whooping cough – and tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella and chickenpox.

For older kids, a booster of the tetanus and pertussis vaccine is typically required, as well as a vaccine for meningococcal disease.

Vaccines reduce the risk of outbreaks in places where transmission of these diseases is easy. Not only do vaccinations help keep both students and teachers safe, it also encourages overall higher community coverage for these vaccines.

How do scientists track the safety of vaccines over time?

Before vaccines are approved, they undergo rigorous trials. During this process, scientists look at the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine, testing it first in small groups to assess safety, then in larger groups to confirm protection and detect uncommon side effects. That process continues after the vaccine is approved. Those systems continually monitor the safety of vaccines, both here in the U.S. as well as around the world.

What are the vaccination coverage trends for kindergartners?

What we have seen is a small downward trend since 2019, the year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It slipped from 95 percent of new kindergartners being up to date on many of their routine vaccines to about 92 percent.

That's a small percentage decrease, so a great majority of parents are still vaccinating their kids. But at the same time, anything below our target of 95 percent for diseases like measles becomes a problem, because that's below the level that's needed for what we call herd immunity, or community immunity. When that happens, it's not a matter of if, but when, we see an outbreak of these infectious diseases.

And while nationwide rates are important to look at, outbreaks happen at local community levels. For example, earlier this year, an outbreak of measles in West Texas spread rapidly through communities where vaccination rates had slipped well below the state average.

So, the vaccination rate at your own school or community is much more meaningful than what the national vaccination rate is.

How do non-medical vaccine exemptions work?

First, actual medical exemptions are rare, and these occur when the vaccine is unsafe for the child to receive, like when he or she has a known severe allergic reaction to vaccine ingredients.

Non-medical exemptions for vaccines are often for religious, personal or philosophical reasons. They have been increasing for the past several years, rising from the range of 1 to 2 percent up to 3.6 percent in the 2024–25 school year. That's a small increase, but again, it's still concerning.

Why are some parents vaccine hesitant?

There are multiple reasons. These include misinformation which algorithm-driven echo chambers on social media can spread at an alarming rate right now. Also, Americans report less trust in institutions and experts, and studies have found growing partisanship around vaccines.

Additionally, vaccines are victims of their own success. They have worked so well that many diseases like polio aren't routinely seen anymore. That might lead a parent to think the risk for their child is so low that the vaccine is not necessary. But the fact is, vaccines are simply holding these diseases at bay. And as vaccination rates drop, these diseases will come back and more kids will be at risk.

What advice do you have for parents?

The most important thing you can do as a parent is to keep your kids up to date on required vaccines. That includes the annual flu shot. Follow your state's requirements and current recommendations from trusted sources like the American Academy of Pediatrics and your own personal pediatrician to know which vaccines your child should have.

You also want to reinforce other common sense approaches to keeping your children healthy. Make sure they know how to wash their hands properly and that they stay home when they're sick. Teach them to sneeze and cough into their elbow instead of into their hands – even though doing so isn't a perfect solution.

As a pediatrician, I love when my families come and talk to me about their concerns. I help them walk through their worries so they can feel more confident that they're making a truly informed decision that's in the best interest of their child's health.

David Higgins is an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus.

SciLine is a free service based at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a nonprofit that helps journalists include scientific evidence and experts in their news stories.

When parents share mental health struggles, *children feel it too*

By HUNTER BOYCE
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (TNS)

ATLANTA — Raising a child is never easy, and for many parents, the journey is made even harder by the quiet weight of mental health struggles. New research shows that mental health conditions often affect both partners – and can deeply influence their children's well-being.

Nearly one in four parents in the United States have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, according to a report from the 2021-23 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. But recent data suggests that these diagnoses could have significant implications for the entire family.

William A. Haseltine, Ph.D., former Harvard Medical School professor and author, along with Mariel Marcano-Olivier, Ph.D., a senior lecturer and mental health researcher at Birmingham City University, recently shared insights on a 2025 couples study and its implications to children's mental health.

Dreamstime / TNS

New research shows that mental health conditions often affect both partners – and can deeply influence their children's well-being.

Spousal correlations

The study used national health insurance records of over 12 million people to analyze nine mental disorders among couples, discovering a pattern – and revealing that spouses can often share mental diagnoses, such as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder.

"The findings were clear: When one spouse was diagnosed with a condition such as depression, the likelihood that the other partner would also experience depression or a related disorder, such as anxiety, increased substantially," Haseltine wrote to Psychology Today. "This association was consistent across diverse countries and cultures. This indicates that these patterns are widespread."

In an article for The Conversation, Marcano-Olivier explained that the study only established a correlation, rather than causation, between shared diagnoses in couples. Still, the expert had some theories as to why someone with a mental health disorder may be more likely to partner with someone who shares a similar diagnosis.

Do opposites still attract?

Assortative mating could explain the pattern of shared mental disorders among couples.

"This theory assumes that we choose partners who are similar to us," Marcano-Olivier wrote. "Normally this is applied to personality and social factors (such as shared religious or socioeconomic background). But this recent study suggests that this choice may extend beyond these factors and into how we think."

There's a possible less conscious explanation too: proximity. According to the mental health expert, people with psychiatric diagnoses may be drawn to similar social circles. People with substance use disorders may bump into each other at a bar, for instance.

It also might be how we were raised during our earliest days that has the greatest effect on how we pick our partners.

"Attachment theory assumes that as infants, we develop a specific emotional bond to our primary caregivers," she wrote. "This early bond then shapes our subsequent emotional and psychological patterns of behaviour [sic] as we get older – and also influences what we're looking for in a relationship."

It could also be that people with mental disorders seek others facing similar struggles because they wish to be better understood. Social identity theory, Marcano-Olivier explained, assumes self-esteem is something we gain through a feeling of belonging to social groups. Those sharing disorders may feel drawn to each other, because being with someone that understands their struggles can be validating.

Like parent, like child

Haseltine emphasized that the impact of shared mental health struggles extends beyond the couple, highlighting the potential consequences for their children.

"Children encounter both genetic predispositions and environmental influences from their parents' mental health," he explained. "This convergence of biological and environmental risk factors can result in earlier onset, increased severity, or multiple psychiatric conditions in affected children."

So how likely are children to develop mental health disorders similar to their parents? A 2025 study involving over 3 million people found that individuals with a first-degree relative affected by depression had a lifetime risk of about 15 percent – nearly twice the risk in the general population.

It's a tough statistic that can lead to more mental health challenges down the road.

"For children, this clustering means exposure to both genetic and environmental risk pathways," Haseltine wrote.

"Facing both genetic and environmental risks increases the chance that children will develop mental health problems early, have multiple issues, or struggle with relationships as adults. These patterns can also affect their partner choices later, continuing the cycle."

FINANCE

Prequalification can allow you to shop around for a mortgage without a hard credit inquiry, which can hurt your score.

Dreamstime / TNS

How to shop for a mortgage without hurting your credit score

By ASHLEE VALENTINE
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Part of the homebuying process involves shopping around with multiple lenders for the best mortgage rate. But without a plan, the very act of shopping around can negatively impact your credit: A higher credit score helps you secure a lower mortgage rate, but a hard credit inquiry like the one lenders perform can decrease your score. Here's what to know about shopping for a mortgage with minimal harm to your credit.

When exploring mortgage options, your credit score typically takes a hit when you obtain a mortgage preapproval from a lender. That's because part of getting preapproved includes the lender checking your credit through what's called a "hard" inquiry. A hard credit inquiry involves a lender pulling your full credit report from a credit bureau, with your permission, which helps them decide whether to lend you money and at what interest rate.

A soft credit inquiry, on the other hand, does not impact your credit score or require your permission. It is typically done for informational purposes and not for lending decisions. A mortgage preapproval with only a soft credit check is hard to come by.

One step down from a preapproval is a mortgage prequalification. Although it does not replace a preapproval, prequalifications involve a only soft credit inquiry. In other words, you can see if you prequalify without hurting your credit score.

Can you get preapproved for a mortgage without a credit check?

No. Hard credit checks are a standard part of the mortgage preapproval process. While you can get a prequalification without a hard credit check, you cannot get preapproved without one.

Even so, you may hear the terms "prequalification" and "preapproval" used interchangeably, even by lenders. So it's smart to check with lenders that their prequalification process doesn't require a hard credit check before moving forward.

There are several ways to avoid a negative impact on your credit score when shopping for a mortgage:

Shop within a short timeframe

It's wise to compare offers from multiple mortgage lenders, but be sure to do it within a 45-day time frame. During that period, all credit inquiries by various lenders only show up as one inquiry on your credit report. One inquiry has a lesser impact on your credit than several inquiries.

Get prequalified for a mortgage

Getting prequalified for a mortgage – some lenders call this a rate check – can be a smart strategy if you're concerned about damaging your credit score as you comparison-shop. This gives you a soft credit check mortgage exploration option.

Keep in mind: While getting prequalified can help minimize damage to your credit score, it's no substitute for getting preapproved when the time comes. In a competitive seller's market, a preapproval is often necessary to prove to sellers you'll be able to get financing if your offer is accepted.

Hold off on applying for new credit

If possible, wait until you officially close on your mortgage before applying for more credit types, such as a new credit card or a personal loan. Multiple inquiries for different types of credit can negatively impact your credit score, hindering your efforts to get a competitive mortgage rate. Even if applying for a credit card only drops your score by a few points, that could make a difference in your interest rate, especially if you're on the cusp between "good" and "very good" or "fair" and "good" credit.

In addition, adding new debt can impact the loan amount you can qualify for. The more debt you have, the less mortgage you will qualify for.

Check your credit report

If you check your credit report before comparison shopping for a mortgage, you can take proactive steps to improve your credit score if needed. You'll also be able to spot and fix any errors. Things to check for include:

- The correct personal identity information (names or contact information you don't recognize could indicate identity theft)
- Correct information on all open and closed accounts, including loans you've fully paid off
- Accurate recording of all payments you've made (pay special attention to any payments flagged as missed or late)
- Account balances that match your actual balances
- Credit score inquiries to confirm they're ones you approved

If something doesn't look right, take steps to dispute and correct it.

You can get a free copy of your credit report from each of the three major credit reporting agencies each week at AnnualCreditReport.com. Don't worry – checking your credit report won't affect your score.

Keep in mind: The credit score you see on free credit reports might differ slightly from the score mortgage lenders see if they use different credit reporting models.

Pay down debt

If your credit score could use improvement, one of the best ways to raise it is to pay down your debt, like credit card balances. If doable, pay off a credit card balance in full – with bonus points for keeping the balance as low as possible moving forward.

It might make more sense to pay down or pay off another loan instead of putting all of your excess funds toward eliminating credit card debt, even if the credit card debt has a higher interest rate. That's because mortgage lenders review your debt-to-income (DTI) ratio through the lens of monthly payments.

For example, if your DTI ratio is a bit high and your student loan payment is higher than your minimum credit card payment, it is better to focus your debt payoff strategy on the loan, which would lower your DTI ratio. In cases like this, it's helpful to consult an experienced loan officer who can advise you on the best ways to qualify for the lowest rates.

How to improve your credit score

The most attractive interest rates are reserved for borrowers with the best credit scores. With a score of 740 or higher, for example, most lenders will offer you a lower interest rate, reducing your monthly payment.

Once you've resolved any errors on your credit report, here are some additional ways of how to improve your credit score:

- Make all payments on time each month: Payment history is a substantial factor in determining credit scores, and it makes sense that mortgage lenders care about being paid in a timely manner. If you have accounts that are past due, bring them current as soon as possible.
- Pay down credit card balances: Paying down credit card balances decreases your credit utilization ratio, which accounts for 30 percent of your FICO credit score.
- Avoid opening or closing accounts: Opening new accounts involves another hard credit check, which dings your credit score. And closing old accounts, even if you never use them, may negatively impact your credit utilization ratio.
- Consider becoming an authorized user on a relative's credit card: Only consider this option if they have an exceptional payment history and manage the card responsibly.

FAQs

- How many mortgage lenders can I approach without impacting my credit score?

If you're only asking questions or requesting prequalification, you can approach as many lenders as you want without hurting your credit. But even if you're requesting preapproval, there's no set amount for how many lenders you can approach – as long as you make all your requests within a single 45-day period, you can get preapproved by as many lenders as you want and have it count as only a single inquiry on your credit report.

- Can I receive mortgage rate quotes without a credit check?

Yes. You can get a mortgage loan estimate through prequalification, which does not require a hard credit check and will not hurt your credit.

- How long do mortgage inquiries stay on my credit report?

A hard inquiry may stay on your credit report for as long as two years. However, the inquiry itself typically only impacts your score for about one year.

Visit Bankrate online at bankrate.com.

PAIR TART APPLES WITH CHICKEN AND FENNEL FOR AN EASY FALL DINNER

By BETH DOOLEY
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

Chicken roasted with apples and fennel, a perfect fall pairing, is both weeknight simple and dinner-party worthy.

Seasoned with rosemary, thyme and sage and drizzled with olive oil, the chicken turns tantalizingly crisp while the rendered fat bastes the onions, apples and fennel until they're meltingly tender.

You want a good sharp apple, such as Haralson, to cut through the richness of the dark meat; the acidity also gives the dish a lift. The caramel notes of the crisped chicken skin echo that of the roasting apples. Do include the fennel. While some folks are put off by raw fennel's pushy licorice taste, the flavors mellow as its edges soften and become slightly sweet and lush. Together, the apples and fennel become a nutty duo, more than the sum of their parts.

Fennel is more versatile and easier to work with than celery, its tough, stringy cousin. Fennel is also hardy enough to prepare in advance. Remove and discard the hard end of the bulb, then slice or chop it up and store in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. Save the stalks for soup and the fronds for garnish. This cool-weather crop is now at its peak, as are our local apples. When at the farmers market, taste the apple samples and choose your favorites. Both are fabulous, raw and cooked.

This roast chicken, apple and fennel recipe is easily doubled for built-in leftovers, which can become the foundation for lunches and simple dinners. Toss the chicken into a salad; simmer the cooked veggies together in a stock for soup, or tangle with pasta and top with sharp cheese.

Try the apple-fennel slaw to serve alongside; it will last a few days in the refrigerator, too. Take a little extra time on Sunday and make it easy in the kitchen through the week.

Roast Chicken With Fennel and Apples
Serves 4 to 6

Chicken thighs are roasted with tart apples and fennel for a quick full-on autumn dinner. Sharp bright apples amplify the mellow anise notes of fennel to give the rich thighs a lift. Serve with a crisp apple-fennel slaw on the side.

2 1/2 to 3 lb. bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs, patted dry
1 small onion, thinly sliced
1 medium fennel bulb, fronds removed, cored and thinly sliced
1 tart apple, such as Haralson or Keepsake, cored and thinly sliced
2 tbsp. olive oil
Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
3 tbsp. mixture of chopped fresh parsley, rosemary, and sage
1/4 c. hard or sweet cider
Fennel and apple slaw (see recipe)

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

Place chicken thighs in a 2-quart baking dish. Tuck the onion, fennel and apple slices around the chicken, and drizzle the olive oil over all. Sprinkle with the salt, pepper and the fresh herbs, reserving some for garnish. Add the cider.

Roast until the chicken becomes crisp and the vegetables become caramelized and tender, about 25 to 35 minutes, basting occasionally with the pan juices. If the chicken skin is not fully crisped, run the chicken under the broiler for about 1 to 2 minutes.

Serve with fennel and apple slaw.

Simple Fennel and Apple Slaw
Serves 4 to 6

Use this crisp slaw to accompany the Roast Chicken With Fennel and Apples.

1 tbsp. apple cider vinegar
1 tbsp. maple syrup or honey
1 tsp. coarse mustard
3 tbsp. sunflower or hazelnut oil
1 large fennel bulb, sliced thin
1 large tart apple, cored and sliced thin
1 small onion, thinly sliced
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
1/4 c. chopped toasted hazelnuts or walnuts

In a small bowl, whisk together the vinegar, maple syrup and mustard, and then whisk in the oil. Put the fennel and apple into a medium bowl and toss with the vinaigrette. Season to taste with the salt and pepper and serve topped with the nuts.

Beth Dooley is the author of "The Perennial Kitchen." Find her at bethdooleyskitchen.com.

Crispy oven chorizo and potato tacos are social media darlings

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

I'm not alone when I say I could eat tacos every day and never get bored. Add Mexican chorizo to the equation, and make that tacos twice a day, Sunday through Saturday.

The highly seasoned sausage made from ground pork, vinegar and dried Mexican chiles is one of my favorite proteins. From dips to soups to eggs and poppers, it adds a flavor bomb like no other to just about any dish that begs to be elevated with a savory and slightly fatty ground meat.

Here, the spicy sausage is tossed with diced potatoes and cilantro as a filling for crispy oven-baked tacos served with sour cream, pico de gallo and a side of corn salad.

Baked tacos are currently a darling on social media, and I think I know why: They're so easy to make and aren't as messy to eat as regular tacos – the melted cheese acts as an edible "glue" holding the meat inside the shell. Best of all, tacos baked in the oven provide an excellent crunch.

Like the regular version, they can be customized with different toppings and add-ins. For instance, I used shredded Mexican blend cheese made with a mix of cheddar, mozzarella, Monterey Jack and asadero cheeses, but you could easily swap in Oaxaca or only use cheddar.

And if you don't care for sour cream or want to stretch your toppings beyond salsa? After baking, you could scatter chopped white onions on top of the tacos, or drizzle on some crema. Sliced radishes and avocado also make excellent garnishes.

Because they're so crunchy and the toppings go on top instead of inside the shell, you'll want to eat these tacos over a plate to catch anything that might fall. That said, my son scarfed down three in a row while sitting on his porch swing without so much as a napkin. They're that tasty.

I paired the tacos with a very simple (and fresh) pico de gallo to make the most out of the summer tomatoes that are still available at farmers markets. Another late summer classic, corn salad, completed the meal.

Crispy Oven Chorizo and Potato Tacos
Makes 8 tacos

FOR TACOS:
1 tablespoon vegetable oil, for frying
1 cup diced potatoes (about 1 medium)
1/2 shallot, diced
1 pound ground chorizo
2 tablespoons chopped cilantro
8 white or yellow 6-inch corn tortillas
Vegetable spray
3/4 cup shredded Mexican cheese blend, or more according to taste
FOR PICO DE GALLO:
1 large, ripe tomato, diced
2 tablespoons chopped red or white onion
2 tablespoons chopped cilantro
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
Sour cream, for serving

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Prepare tacos: Heat vegetable oil in a large skillet over medium heat. When it sizzles, add diced potatoes and shallot to the pan and cook until the potatoes are lightly browned and easily pierced with a fork, about 7-8 minutes.

Add chorizo to a pan and cook until meat is brown and crispy, 5-7 minutes, breaking it into crumbles with a wooden spoon as you go. Add cilantro and toss until combined.

Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Lightly coat the bottom of each of the tortillas with vegetable spray and lay on the baking sheet.

Divide cheese among the tortillas and place in the oven. Bake for around 2 minutes, or until cheese is completely melted.

Remove from oven and divide the chorizo-potato mixture on one half of the tortilla. Fold each in half to make a taco, and press down lightly with a spatula to ensure they stay folded.

Return pan to oven and bake until lightly browned, toasted, and crisp around the edges, 15-18 minutes.

While tacos are baking, prepare the salsa. In a medium bowl, combine diced tomatoes, chopped onion and chopped cilantro. Season to taste with salt and pepper and set aside.

When tacos are finished, remove to a plate and serve with salsa and sour cream.

Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

These crispy, cheesy chorizo and potato tacos are baked in the oven to achieve an extra crunch.
Gretchen McKay / TNS

Pop punk vets Yellowcard calls *'Better Days'* the 'ultimate redemption song'

By NATE JACKSON
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

More than two decades after their peak, the music of Yellowcard is a pop punk message in a bottle. The note that washed ashore from a simpler time describes the image of a young, sharply-dressed band full of aspirations, thrashing on their instruments – violin included – in the echoey tomb of an underground parking garage in the music video for "Ocean Avenue" as the chorus kicks into overdrive.

"If I could find you now, things would get better, we could leave this town and run forever, let your waves crash down on me and take me away," frontman Ryan Key sang ecstatically at the top of his lungs.

That hit song, the title track of 2003's "Ocean Avenue," created a tidal wave of success that changed the course of their career from struggling artists to a world-touring headliner and darlings of MTV's Total Request Live.

"The first time it happened, we were really young," Key said, gingerly grasping a spoon with his heavily tattooed hand while stirring a cup of hot tea. "We were quite literally a garage band one minute, and then we were playing on the MTV Video Music Awards and David Letterman and whatever else the next minute."

It's a moment that hasn't escaped his memory 22 years later. Now, he and his bandmates – violinist Sean Mackin, bassist Josh Portman and guitarist Ryan Mendez – are far from the ocean but not too far from water as they look out at a sparkling pool from the window from a suite at the Yaamava' Resort and Casino in Highland. A couple hours from now, the band will play a splashy pool party gig for 98.7 ALT FM. The set will include a raft of all the old hits, including "Ocean Avenue" of course, as well as their first new songs in almost a decade.

Before the release of the first singles for the new album, "Better Days," it might've been easy to write off their 11th album as another release destined to be overshadowed by their early catalog. However, with the right amount of internal inspiration and outside help from Blink 182 drummer Travis Barker, who produced and played all the drums on the album, the result was a batch of new songs that haven't simply been washed out to sea. Quite the opposite, actually.

Prior to the album's release, the title track "Better Days" reached No. 1 on the Billboard Alternative Airplay chart. This achievement came after a 22-year wait since their first appearance on the chart with the "Ocean Avenue" single "Way Away." Key also notes that it's the first time fans are using the band's new music for their TikTok videos instead of "Ocean Avenue."

"That's crazy," Key said. "Everyone is using 'Better Days.' I don't think we're alone in that. I think for bands in our scene, new music is getting a lot of love and a lot of attention again, and it's amazing to see."

It's been about three years since the band reemerged to play a reunion set at RiotFest in Chicago, following their 2017 farewell show at the House of Blues in Anaheim. At the point they were ready to call it quits, the band was struggling to sell enough tickets to their shows to keep the dream alive. For Mackin, fatherhood forced him to also consider his family's financial stability, prompting him to enter the corporate workforce as a sales rep and eventually becoming a service director for Toyota. At one point, he was responsible for managing 120 employees. "I just thought that was going to be what I was going to do to take care of my family for the next 20 years," Mackin said.

After Yellowcard's hiatus, Key continued playing music in several projects that distanced themselves from the pop punk sound – including recording solo work under his full name William Ryan Key, touring with bassist Portman at his side. Key also produced a post-rock electronic-heavy project called Jedha with Mendez, and the pair also does a lot of TV and film scoring work. For a long time, Key and his bandmates mourned the loss of what they had with Yellowcard. It was the most important thing in Key's life, though he said he didn't realize how much the band truly shaped him until it was over.

"Ungrateful is not the word to use about how I felt back then. It's more like I didn't have the tools to appreciate it, to feel gratitude and really let things happen and and stay in the moment and stay focused. Because I was so young, I was so insecure about my place, my role in all of it," Key said.

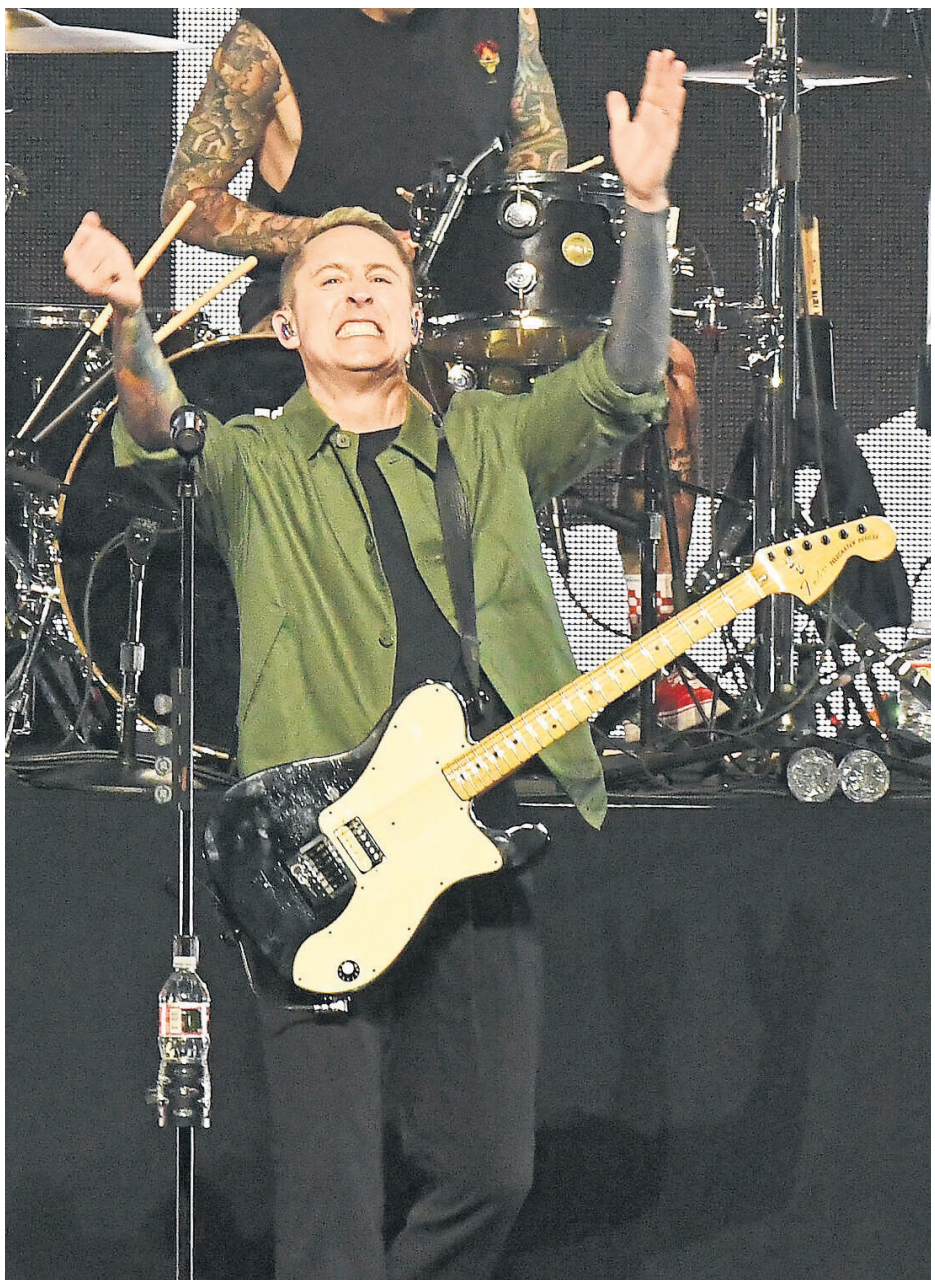
But after some time away, the raucous 2022 Riot Fest reunion show relit the band's fire in a way they hadn't expected. They followed up with a 2023 EP "Childhood Eyes" that pushed the band to take things further with a new full album. Along with these plans came the stunning news that Barker would sign on to produce and play drums for them on the project. For a band that grew up idolizing Blink 182 and Barker specifically as the band's red-hot engine behind the kit who spent the last 20 years evolving into a music mogul, it was a surreal experience.

"We look at him like a general. It was never lost that the best drummer of our generation is playing drums with us," Mackin said. "We know him as Travis now, but man, this guy is just oozing talent – he's doing all these amazing things and he doesn't seem overrun by it, not distracted one bit. While we were recording, he was right there with us."

Key says he was initially intimidated singing in front of Barker in the studio and had a few moments where negative, self-conscious thoughts were getting the better of him in the vocal booth during recording. Instead of getting annoyed, he says Barker helped ease his anxiety with a few simple words.

"Travis came into the booth, closed the door, put his hand on my shoulder, and he said, 'You're gonna do this as many times as you need to do it. I'm gonna be here the whole time.'" Barker was truly speaking from experience. He told Key at the time that he'd just recorded 87 rough takes of his parts on "Lonely Road," his hit song with Jelly Roll and MGK. "That was a real crossroads for me," Key said.

The aspect of the album that feels most akin to "Ocean Avenue" was that Barker never really allowed them to overthink anything when it came to songwriting, a skill the band had unwittingly mastered as kids back in the "Ocean Avenue" days by writing songs on the fly in the studio with little time to care about how a song might end up before they recorded it.



Photos from imageSPACE via ZUMA Press Wire / TNS

TOP: Sean Mackin, Ryan Key, Josh Portman and Ryan Mendez of Yellowcard perform onstage at the 2024 iHeartRadio ALTer EGO at the Honda Center on Jan. 13, 2024, in Anaheim, California. **ABOVE:** Ryan Key with Yellowcard, performs onstage at the 2024 iHeartRadio ALTer EGO at the Honda Center on Jan. 13, 2024, in Anaheim, California.

"There's something about the way we did this record with Travis, where we would walk in and did it in a way we haven't done in 20 plus years with him saying 'We're gonna write and record a song today,'" Key said. " It was a return to that style of songwriting where you have to kind of get out of your comfort zone and just throw and go."

The final product moves swiftly over 10 songs, the track list starts with a flurry of energy from the bombastic opening drums of "Better Days" that propel a song on inner reflection on the past. It moves on to the high-energy heartbreak of "Love Letters," featuring Matt Skiba of Alkaline Trio. Avril Lavigne lends her soaring vocals to the unrequited love song "You Broke Me Too." Songs like "City of Angels" and "Bedroom Posters" track episodes in Key's life where his band's hiatus took a negative toll on his outlook on life but also about looking for a way back to rediscovering himself. The album wraps with the acoustic lullaby "Big Blue Eyes," which Keys wrote as a tribute to his son.

Though the songs on "Better Days" frequently wrestle with self-doubt and uncertainty, the response from fans has been surprisingly supportive, Key said.

"I cannot recall seeing this level of overwhelming positive feedback. People are just flipping out over these songs," the frontman said. "The recording was such a whirlwind. When I listen to it, it's still kind of like 'When did I write that song?' It happened so fast, and we made the record so fast, but I'm glad we just did it." Despite the success, Key is hesitant to label the band comeback kids, "probably because we are officially passed kids label," he said.

"Maybe it's the return of the gentlemen?" Mackin joked.

Whatever they call themselves, coming back to the band after so many years of different experiences has made Yellowcard's second shot at a career feel all the more rewarding.

"Because you feel like you know you're capable of something other than being in this band, capable of connecting with your family in a way that you couldn't when you were on the road all the time," Mackin said. "There's things that happened in that break that set us up for success as human beings, not just as creative people."

For Key, it's about taking all the lessons they've learned as a band and applying them to their future, realizing that the album's title refers not just to the past behind them, but what lies ahead.

"This record needed to be the ultimate revival, the ultimate redemption song for our band," Key said. "And so far it's, it's proven to be that."

SERIES REVIEW

Bertrand Calmeau / CBS / TNS

In one episode of "DMV," a broken air conditioner causes havoc on a sweltering L.A. day.

'DMV' drives a pleasant sitcom into LA's most dreaded office

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Work! It's the thing most of us have to do, some of us like to do and many of us would rather not do, and it's no surprise that it's the subject of so much TV.

Workplace comedy has been responsible for some of television's greatest series – "Taxi," "Barney Miller," "NewsRadio," "Parks and Recreation," "30 Rock," "The Office," obviously, "Abbott Elementary," just off the top of my head – and some of its shortest lived. Anywhere a job gets done can theoretically support one – pick a workplace (sushi bar, travel agency, magic shop, museum, whatever), write a pitch, get an agent and, presto, you're a TV writer. You can put the characters in later.

Okay – it's not quite that easy. But there is a common Mad Libs structure to such series, whether filmed before a live audience or single camera, placing a variety pack of individuals into a shared space. Some characters might be related; there may be romantic attraction between a couple. Not much actual work will get done, and what gets done may make no real-world sense, but the office is the box that holds them and colors their lives. "The Paper," "Animal Control," "St. Denis Medical,""-Going Dutch" and "Shifting Gears" are among those currently airing and streaming and, minor stylistic variation notwithstanding, they have more in common than not.

Of all the offices a person might be required to visit, the Department of Motor Vehicles, with its purgatorial air, has one of the worst reputations. It's a safe bet that, sitting there waiting for your number to be called, you never thought, "I would really love to work here," but this being Hollywood, you may have thought, "There's a show in this."

Indeed, the most surprising thing about "DMV," a single-camera, non-mockumentary sitcom premiering Monday on CBS, is that it took so long to arrive. Created by Dana Klein (and inspired by Katherine Heiny's short story "Chicken-Flavored And Lemon-Scented"), it's a representative example of its kind, not bad, not exceptional, a platform for some good actors to do their work. Its perfect averageness makes it easy to dismiss, but it's a painless, pleasant half-hour, with a smattering of genuine laughs. And like every such show, it can be expected to ripen with age, if age comes.

Harriet Dyer plays Colette, sweet and awkward and nominally the ensemble's main character. A driving examiner, she has the nickname "E-Z Pass," because she never flunks an applicant. She has a crush-at-first-sight on new hire Noa (Alex Tarrant), a charming, cheery hunk/lunk from Down Under. Manager Barbara (Molly Kearney) loves her job "and every single person who works here"; Vic (Tony Cavalero) is the series' inexplicable oddball, intense, pumped-up; Ceci (Gigi Zumbado) is the staff photographer, who in her mind is shooting for Vogue. Finally there's Tim Meadows, as Gregg, whose patented deadpan I have found a highlight of every show he's ever landed in. Both as actor and character – jaded, cynical, satisfied – he's the series' sane old pro, who will instruct Noa in the art of taking a cigarette break without a cigarette.

Situations are classic. Cost-cutting consultants arrive to interview the employees ("I requested time off because my mama passed away, but was denied," says Vic, "and it's happened twice") and decide whether the branch will live. (There are four Hollywood branches in this alternative universe – as if.) Colette gives Noa, who needs an American license, his driving test, and he's terrible. It's a very hot day and none of the employees are allowed to touch the air conditioning. In a variant of a situation that has likely appeared in two out of every three sitcoms ever produced, an old friend of Colette's, now a TV star, shows up at the branch; Colette tells elaborate lies about having followed her own dream of becoming a veterinarian, compounded by the "assistance" of a wig-wearing Vic as her husband. Of course, a dog will become sick. There will be pranks.

"What we do here makes a difference," Barbara tells the consultants in an inspirational speech, making the point that "DMV" is not out to denigrate the institution or the people who work there. However bored the person helping you at the window may seem, or if they're disinclined to return your cheery hello, that person in line before you may have been a jerk. Remember that when your license expires.

MOVIE REVIEW

'Tron: Ares' has style but suffers storytelling glitch

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

If the cult techno sci-fi films "Tron" (1982) and "Tron: Legacy" (2010) are about humans going into "the grid" of the digital world, then the newest installment in this franchise, "Tron: Ares," is about the digital world invading our own. Allegorically, this feels right for our particular moment, the film depicting AI super soldiers wreaking a path of destruction through human cities, but despite the ethical questions the film presents, it still can't shake the franchise's enduring techno-optimism (or inevitability), even as it encourages getting "offline."

This iteration of "Tron" is helmed by Norwegian director Joachim Rønning, with a screenplay by Jesse Wigutow. The Flynn men, Kevin (Jeff Bridges) and his son Sam (Garrett Hedlund, who starred in "Legacy") are now out of the picture, and two warring tech companies are locked in an arms race for the future of artificial intelligence. The Kim sisters have taken over the Flynns' company, ENCOM, while bratty upstart Julian Dillinger (Evan Peters) runs Dillinger Systems under the watchful, but ultimately powerless, eye of his mother (Gillian Anderson).

While Eve Kim (Greta Lee) searches for a message from her late sister, an AI optimist who believed in the tech's possibility to improve human life, Julian Dillinger is 3D-printing digital tanks and "expendable" super soldiers off his grid for investor presentations. Too bad their real-world lifespan is only 29 minutes. When he gets wind that Eve has located a "permanence code" thanks to her sister's message, Julian sends his two best soldiers, Ares (Jared Leto) and Athena (Jodie Turner-Smith) to retrieve the code by any means necessary.

If the appeal of "Tron" was its groundbreaking computer-generated imagery and forward-thinking concept, then the appeal of "Legacy" was its sleek sci-fi design and digital disco score by Daft Punk, offering more of a vibes-based experience than absorbing narrative. "Ares" tackles more story, but the style is borrowed from "Legacy," just in new colorways – Dillinger's digital squadron is cloaked in menacing red neon – and Nine Inch Nails offers up a crunchy, industrial, sexy soundtrack for the action.

But the story itself is bitten from a tale over 200 years old, one that now seems a part of our primordial DNA, or at least the DNA of the stories we tell ourselves over and over again. That is, of course, Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein." If the themes of creating a monster that starts to think on its own weren't clear enough, the book is directly referenced when Ares, stalking Eve, catches a glimpse of her reading it in a social media video. As he quickly processes the book's content, a few lines make an impression. Ares is already starting to question things, like Julian's words about his soldiers being "expendable," and the deletion of a fellow "program" during a hacking mission in the ENCOM grid (cleverly visualized like breaking and entering). Combined with a new sensation, a "feeling" when he experiences rain, and learning about "Frankenstein," his system is primed to go rogue.

Typically in sci-fi, artificial intelligence gaining sentience means bad things for human beings. But as Eve posits in a televised interview, "what if its major malfunction is benevolence?" Optimistic, as always. What "Tron: Ares" suggests is that independent thinking can result in benevolence and empathy. It's following the directive, by any means necessary, that results in death and destruction.

With his searching, but empty blue eyes, Leto is physically perfect for playing a questioning AI, and Lee brings her steely presence to bear on Eve, Peters the appropriately slimy essence to Julian. Turner-Smith demonstrates her "Terminator" bona fides as well.

'Tron Ares'

★★ ½

MPA rating: PG-13 (for violence/action)

Running time: 1:59

How to watch: In theaters Oct. 10

Leah Gallo / Disney Enterprises, Inc. / TNS

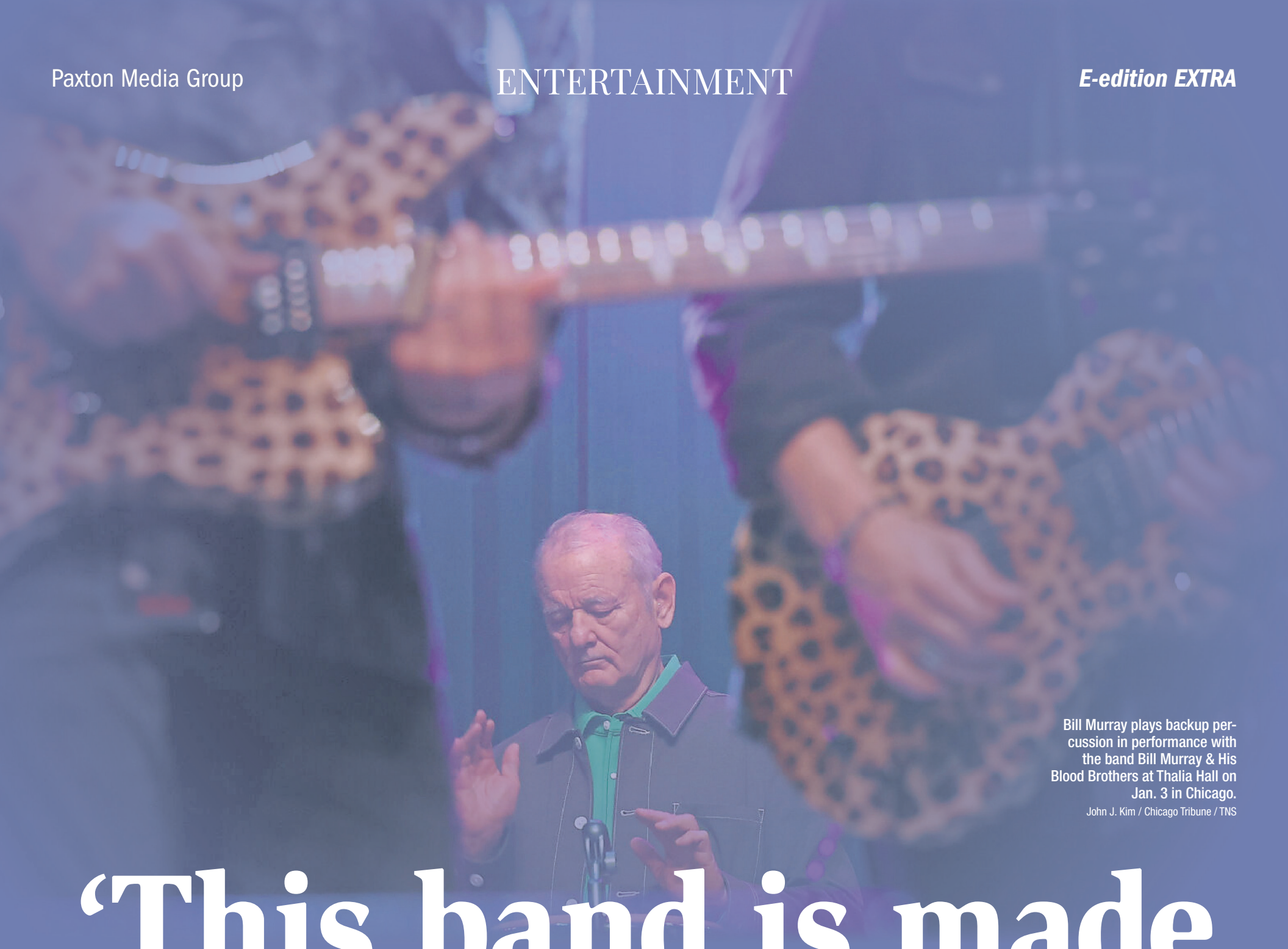
Greta Lee, left, as Eve Kim, Jared Leto as Ares and Arturo Castro as Seth Flores in "Tron: Ares."

But the problem with "Ares" is the script, which spells out everything for us. There's no subtext, room for interpretation or ambiguity, especially as it plays out like the scene of Frankenstein's monster discovering a daisy. Wouldn't it be more fun if we could uncover these themes on our own, without being prompted?

Rønning, who helmed a later "Pirates of the Caribbean" film and "Young Woman and the Sea," provides serviceable direction of the material, without offering much innovation. The film loses fidelity toward the end, as it becomes a crashy, pixelated monster movie, as the real world has no capability for hosting the sleek, bloodless appeal of the grid.

Ultimately, "Tron: Ares" grapples with questions that plague us all, like how nefarious self-sentient artificial intelligence might be. It lands on the diplomatic argument that AI is only as good as the person wielding it, but doesn't offer answers on how to ensure that (aside from a big old battle). But furthermore, it can't answer the question of any AI evangelist: why try to make AI more human when we can just be human ourselves?

Perhaps that's too much to ask of a sci-fi movie that should be more about style than substance. All "Tron: Ares" needed to be was a vibe, but it delivers existential questions that are pre-chewed pablum, rather than searching moral quandaries.



Bill Murray plays backup percussion in performance with the band Bill Murray & His Blood Brothers at Thalia Hall on Jan. 3 in Chicago.
John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune / TNS

'This band is made up of all-stars'

Bill Murray not joking with Blood Brothers

By GEORGE VARGA
The San Diego Union-Tribune (TNS)

SAN DIEGO — Bill Murray, a late-blooming lead singer in a bluesy classic-rock band called Blood Brothers? The veteran film star and former mainstay on TV's "Saturday Night Live" belting out the vocals on songs by the Kinks, Stephen Stills, Paul Butterfield and more?

No, this is not a shelved "SNL" skit featuring Murray's popular "Nick The Lounge Singer" character lampooning Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," Wilson Pickett's "In The Midnight Hour" and the Dave Clark Five's "Catch Us If You Can."

Blood Brothers is – with one famous exception – a polished group of seasoned music professionals. Its newest member just happens to be a long-acclaimed actor whose role in the 2003 film "Lost in Translation" earned him a best actor Oscar nomination.

"This band is made up of all-stars," said Murray of the nine-man Blood Brothers. "Each of them brings a different energy, which makes me really have to dig in," the avocational singer continued. "I enjoy the challenge each night and am thankful they keep it coming!"

The all-stars Murray is referring to are headed by ace guitarists Mike Zito and Albert Castiglia, who co-founded Blood Brothers in 2022. Both sing and lead their own bands. Between them, the two have won 14 national Blues Music Awards.

Zito is also a mainstay in the band Royal Southern Brotherhood. Its lineup teams him with Neville Brothers' co-founder Cyril Neville and guitarist Devon Allman, the son of the late Allman Brothers Band co-founder Gregg Allman.

Castiglia counts such blues heavyweights as Junior Wells and Pinetop Perkins among his many past employers. He and Zito are longtime collaborators who, for their current tour with Murray and Blood Brothers, are joined by Canned Heat guitarist Jimmy Vivino, best known for his lengthy tenure in the house band on TV's "Late Night with Conan O'Brien."

"If you can't engage with the crowd, what's the point?" Vivino said. "Watching Bill get off on stage is a perfect example of that. His charisma and his ability to connect is an amazing thing to behold and I think Junior (Wells) would've loved seeing this show."

And what draws Murray to the classic and lesser-known songs he performs with Blood Brothers?

"Lyrics," he replied. "And the music with them adds that much more."

Caddyshack golf tournament

Murray's pairing with Blood Brothers was largely a matter of happenstance.

Last year, his younger brother, John, invited the band to perform in Florida at The Murray Brothers' Caddyshack Golf Tournament. The event is named after "Caddyshack," the 1980 hit film comedy that features Bill Murray as a colorfully unhinged golf-course groundskeeper.

The famed actor joined Blood Brothers for part of the band's tournament set. It included some songs by the Rascals, one of Murray's favorite groups. A very good time was had by all. Afterwards, Zito suggested Murray join the group and he readily agreed.

Their first performance as Bill Murray & His Blood Brothers took place this January in Chicago, where Murray got his start in comedy as a member of the Second City troupe. He had first tried his hand at singing in the 1960s as a teenager in an Illinois rock cover band called the Dutch Masters.

Like Vermeer's long-lost painting, "The Concert," Murray's foray into rock quickly evaporated.

But his love for music continued unabated, be it crooning his proudly schmaltzy versions of the "Star Wars" film theme on "SNL" as "Nick The Lounge Singer" or singing a warbly but earnest version of Roxy Music's "More Than This" in a key scene in "Lost in Translation," in which Murray co-starred with Scarlett Johanssen.

More recently, he teamed in 2017 with acclaimed cellist Jan Vogler, violinist Mira Wang and pianist Vanessa Perez. Their joint "New Worlds" tour and album featured the actor-cum-vocalist singing favorites by George & Ira Gershwin and Stephen Foster, and reciting poems and prose by Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and others.

Today, having Murray's name on the marquee is clearly the biggest drawing point for audiences at concerts by what is billed as Bill Murray & His Blood Brothers. But the famed actor happily shares the spotlight and lead vocal duties with the band's other members while he alternates between singing and playing cowbell, congas and tambourine.

Offstage, Murray, 75, is determined to not command an undue amount of attention. So determined, in fact, that he only agrees to discuss the nine-man Blood Brothers if the interviews also include Zito, Castiglia and Vivino.

As a result of that stipulation – and the fact Murray only returned Oct. 3 from a trip to Ireland – this is the first interview the four Blood Brothers have done so far, according to the band's publicist.

To add another layer of intrigue, this joint interview had to be conducted by email. Even so, the four band members played off each other's answers in real time last week as they wrote their replies in a Google Word document.

Murray kept most of his responses brief. He also declined to answer nearly half of the questions. But he appeared to enjoy the sometimes humorous interactions with his fellow Blood Brothers. The interview has been edited to space and clarity.

Q: Where are each of you today?

MIKE: St. Louis, my home. Taking care of kids and working on tunes.

BILL: Just flew home from Ireland. Now watching the Cubs game in New York.

ALBERT: I'm at home in Palm Bay, FL, watching "Monday Night Football."

JIMMY: I'm in L.A. I just got back from a two-week European tour with Canned Heat. Twelve hours later, I found myself at the Fonda Theatre here with Conan (O'Brien) and Bill Burr for a podcast taping of "Conan O'Brien Needs A Friend."

Q: Albert, what are the biggest musical and life lessons you learned from working with Junior Wells? And have you thought about having Bill sing Junior's "Messin' With The Kid" with the Blood Brothers?

ALBERT: I learned a lot from Junior, but I think the biggest lesson I learned was the importance of being vulnerable on stage and connecting with your audiences. If you can't engage with the crowd, what's the point? Watching Bill get off onstage is a perfect example of that. His charisma and his ability to connect is an amazing thing to behold and I think Junior would've loved seeing this show.

As far as Bill doing "Messing With The Kid," I'm all for it! It's up to him, though, and I think it's important for him to find himself, musically, and do songs he's comfortable with. That, to me, is the important thing. Bill's given us an amazing gift and adventure in the last year and a half. And because of that, we as a band want him to do what makes him feel good. Him being comfortable on stage and doing material that makes his toes tingle is what makes this work.

Q: Mike, you've done albums for Germany's Ruf Records. Why do you think Europeans have such reverence for blues and other American roots-music styles?

MIKE: I think because it comes from a different place, America, they have this idea of how special it really is. They understand the circumstances that had to take place to create this American music. Whereas, it's just such a part of our culture here, we don't really recognize its importance as much.

Q: Jimmy, of all the many music greats who played on "The Tonight Show" during your tenure, who did you most enjoy collaborating with and why?

JIMMY: The obvious is B.B. King, then Al Green, and Isaac Hayes. Bonnie Raitt was always there when anything great was happening. Bonnie was the lynchpin for anything great in blues that was happening on TV.

Q: Bill, how did you rate yourself and your early band the Dutch Masters, and did the band's repertoire include any of the songs you now do with Blood Brothers (such as, perhaps, "Tired of Waiting" by the Kinks, "Catch Us If You Can" by the Dave Clark Five or "Like a Rolling Stone")?" If so, which ones?

BILL: (no response)

Q: Albert, Mike and Jimmy, did you likewise grow up playing some or most of the songs Blood Brothers now perform with Bill and what songs by other artists do you hope to add to the repertoire for this or future tours? Can you or Bill envision him singing "Going Up the Country," "Let's Work Together," or other songs that, I'm guessing, Jimmy does with Canned Heat?

MIKE: We always are coming up with new material for Bill; you just have to sweet talk him into doing them.

ALBERT: Yeah, definitely. However, Bill's got this knack for digging up some real cool deep tracks that I hadn't even been aware of. I'd much rather him bring songs to the table because, most of the time, they're great ideas. He keeps teasing (doing) "Walk Away Renee" by the Left Banke and "Dear Mr. Fantasy." I hope we can do those.

JIMMY: (We play) some Blood Brothers' songs. We have a lot of other artists' songs; I can't give 'em away before the show – a good mix of originals and songs people know, which are not softballs.

Q: Might a Blood Brothers' album with Bill be in the offing?

MIKE: Bill and I have had conversations about writing songs and recording songs, for sure. I think if we don't do that at some point, we will have missed an amazing opportunity to capture all of this energy.

JIMMY: Anything and everything is possible.

BILL: Something is in the works …

ALBERT: I'm in!

Q: Have all of you ever golfed together in a foursome? Who won? Who has the lowest and highest handicap?

MIKE: No, I cannot golf.

BILL: They should stick to making music.

ALBERT: I haven't played in years. I sucked then and I suck now. Greenpeace and PETA are on my case for all the wildlife I've killed on all the golf courses of this great nation.

JIMMY: I don't golf, I don't hunt, I don't fish, and I don't camp. We saw what happened in the woods on "The Sopranos."

Q: When Ringo was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, he offered some sage advice to musicians (which I'll paraphrase here): "If you are in a van with a band and you fart, own up to it." What mode of transportation is Blood Brothers using for your current tour, and what would you add to Ringo's sage advice?

MIKE: Don't fart.

BILL: I'm usually the one driving …

ALBERT: Confucius says: "Better Out Than In!" I always own up to cutting the cheese. It's the other three always denying while they're supplying! We're doing a lot of flying on this run. God help the other passengers with the gashouse gang. They might bring back the mask mandate back after we get done stinking up the planes!

JIMMY: After everyone would naturally blame Albert, the real culprit would ultimately 'fess up.

Q: Is it a fool's errand to tell jokes to Bill, or is he receptive?

MIKE: I tell Bill jokes all the time, and I make sure they're not funny. He loves that. I also repeat his lines from movies he's made. That's when he starts rolling his eyes.

ALBERT: Mike, he rolls his eyes at your jokes, too.

Valerie Terranova / Getty Images / TNS

A display with exclusive edition merchandise for Taylor Swift's new album, "The Life of a Showgirl," is seen at Target on Oct. 2 in New York City.

How Taylor Swift scored the biggest album opening of all time

By MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Madonna's "MDNA." Bruce Springsteen's "The Rising." Mariah Carey's "Memoirs of an Imperfect Angel."

According to the Recording Industry Association of America, none of these albums – each the 12th studio LP by its respective maker – has sold 4 million copies in the United States in the decade or more since it was released.

Yet that's what Taylor Swift just did in a single week with her 12th album, " The Life of a Showgirl," which Billboard reported Monday had moved 4.002 million copies in the seven days between Oct. 3 and 9.

That figure, which combines sales and streaming numbers, represents the biggest opening week for an album in modern history, breaking the record set by Adele 10 years ago when her " 25 " moved 3.482 million units in its first week.

Swift marked the achievement on Instagram on Monday with a note to her 281 million followers.

"I'll never forget how excited I was in 2006 when my first album sold 40,000 copies in its first week," she wrote. "I was 16 and couldn't even fathom that that many people would care enough about my music to invest their time and energy into it. Since then I've tried to meet and thank as many people as I could who have given me the chance to chase this insane dream. Here we are all these years later and a hundred times that many people showed up for me this week.

"I have 4 million thank you's I want to send to the fans," she added, "and 4 million reasons to feel even more proud of this album than I already was."

The speed with which Swift hit the 4 million mark is undeniably impressive. Morgan Wallen's "I'm the Problem," the biggest album of 2025 so far, has sold and streamed the equivalent of 4.2 million copies, according to the trade journal Hits. But "I'm the Problem" has been out since mid-May; "Showgirl" will almost certainly have surpassed Wallen's LP by the end of this week (if it hasn't already).

What's more remarkable is where "Showgirl's" blockbuster success comes in the arc of Swift's career.

Madonna and Springsteen were both in their early 50s when they released their 12th LPs; Carey was 40 when "Imperfect Angel" came out. Swift, in contrast, is only 35 – one advantage of starting out professionally as a teenager.

Still, Swift has been a star for nearly two decades, a point at which many pop musicians have shifted the focus of their work to touring even as they continue to make new records generally ignored by all but their most devoted fans. In 2024, according to Pollstar, Madonna's and Springsteen's latest road shows – each drawn from a catalog packed with hit songs – were among the year's 10 highest-grossing tours.

And indeed Swift has been amply rewarded on the road: At No. 1 on Pollstar's list was her Eras tour, which sold more than $2 billion in tickets across 149 dates on five continents.

Yet unlike virtually every other veteran act in music, Swift's recording business is growing along with her live business.

"Everything that's happening here is historic and unprecedented," said Hits' editor in chief, Lenny Beer. "Maybe if the Beatles had stayed together, we'd have seen something like it."

Also worth considering: Nobody seems to think "The Life of a Showgirl" is Swift's best album. Reviews have been mixed, and even some fans have expressed disappointment with the record on social media – a once-unthinkable development among the fiercely loyal Swifties.

So how did the singer pull off such a feat?

First, a little math: Of "Showgirl's" 4 million units, approximately 3.5 million were sales of either digital or physical versions of the album (including CDs, cassettes and vinyl LPs); the remaining half-million came from streams of the album's songs on platforms like Spotify and Apple Music, which the data firm Luminate counts toward what it calls streaming equivalent albums.

"Showgirl's" 12 songs racked up 681 million streams in all, Billboard said – the fourth-biggest streaming week of all time, behind Swift's "The Tortured Poets Department " and Drake's "Scorpion" and "Certified Lover Boy." But the album's sales number is the largest ever recorded since Luminate started tracking sales electronically in 1991.

Among Swift's strategies to get to that number was selling more than three dozen editions of the album, each with its own artwork and bonus material designed to lure collectors. On vinyl alone, "Showgirl" came out in eight so-called variants, which helped drive the album's first-week vinyl sales to a modern record of 1.3 million copies.

Offering something for sale doesn't necessarily mean anyone will buy it, of course. Yet Swift was positioning "The Life of a Showgirl" as a juggernaut from the moment she announced it. Appearing with her fiancé, the NFL player Travis Kelce, on his "New Heights" podcast in August, the singer described the album as a return to the hit-making ways of albums like "Red" and "1989" after the relatively experimental "Folklore" and "Tortured Poets Department."

To make "Showgirl," she reteamed with the Swedish producers Max Martin and Shellback, with whom she'd collaborated on some of her biggest singles, including "Blank Space," "Bad Blood" and "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together." On "New Heights" she and Kelce talked about the new album as a "180" from the moody confessions of "Tortured Poets," whetting appetites for the kind of crisply hooky Taylor Swift songs that blanketed Top 40 radio in the mid-2010s.

Promised the football star: "12 bangers."

Once "Showgirl" was out, Swift jumped into the promotional fray with more gusto than she'd summoned in years, sitting for numerous radio interviews and putting in appearances on Graham Norton's, Jimmy Fallon's and Seth Meyers' late-night shows; the weekend after the album's release, a glorified sizzle reel called "The Official Release Party of a Showgirl" played in AMC movie theaters across the country.

On Monday, Swift kept the conversation going with the announcement that two Eras-related projects are headed to Disney+ in December: a six-part behind-the-scenes docuseries and a concert film of the tour's finale in Vancouver.

"One of the hardest parts of ensuring you have a record-setting first week is making sure that everyone who could possibly be interested in your album knows about it," said Bill Werde, director of the Bandier Program for Recording and Entertainment Industries at Syracuse University. "I'm not sure anyone has ever covered that need the way Taylor did with this album cycle."

Yet "The Life of a Showgirl" has not been greeted as enthusiastically as some of Swift's earlier work.

Pitchfork said "her music's never been less compelling," while The Guardian called the album "dull razzle-dazzle from a star who seems frazzled." Fans on TikTok have complained that Swift's lyrics – which take up her romance with Kelce, the burdens of fame and an apparent beef with Charli XCX – are unusually shallow; some have even formulated a kind of trad-wife critique of "Showgirl" in which Swift is seen as upholding regressive ideas about marriage and domesticity.

The album has also attracted criticism from people who say Swift's songs recycle familiar elements from other pop tunes without giving credit: the Jackson 5's "I Want You Back" in "Wood," for instance, and the Jonas Brothers' "Cool" in the LP's closing title track.

"When every song is a derivative of another song, that's an issue," said one hit songwriter who asked not to be named in order to speak freely. "That one song is the Jonas Brothers song – the exact same melody. And here's how lazy that is: It's the same key and the same tempo."

In Werde's view, Swift's place atop the pop hierarchy makes such carping inevitable. "Anytime an artist gets this big, there's going to be backlash," he said – a take with which Swift would likely agree.

"I welcome the chaos," she said in an interview with Apple Music's Zane Lowe. "The rule of show business is: If it's the first week of my album release and you are saying either my name or my album title, you're helping."

Even so, the polarized reaction to "Showgirl" – Swift's 15th album to debut at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 – raises questions about the breadth of Swift's popularity as compared to its depth. Should the album's gargantuan numbers be taken as a sign that she appeals to a wide spectrum of pop music lovers or to a committed group of hardcore Swifties willing to spend untold amounts of money to demonstrate their loyalty?

"Showgirl's" second-week stats should provide the beginnings of an answer, given that they won't be shaped by one-time sales of all those limited-edition variants.

Then again, another unprecedented chart achievement from the album's first week is already shedding some light on the matter: "The Fate of Ophelia," the album's lead single, is the first song ever to debut inside the top 10 of Billboard's Pop Airplay chart – an indication of the heavy Top 40 radio play it's getting along with the millions of daily streams that have kept it atop Spotify's U.S. Top 50 tally since the song came out.

That's one banger certified, with more perhaps to come.

BOOKS

REVIEWS

Ever wondered 'Why Rats Laugh'? Read on

By KEVIN CANFIELD
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

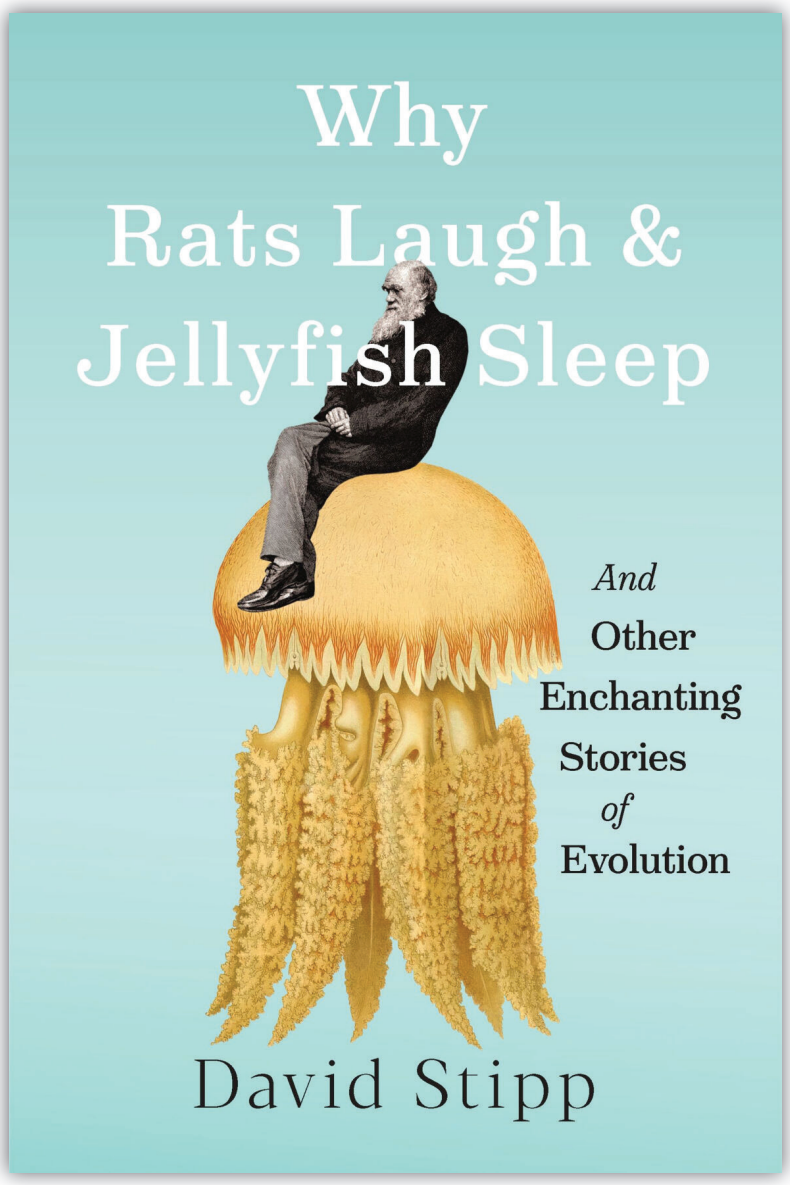
David Stipp's "Why Rats Laugh & Jellyfish Sleep" is a breezy ode to nature's long game.

The respected science expert's beautifully written book celebrates the adaptive ingenuity of animals whose traits have evolved over millions of years. That includes us – though humans are, at best, supporting characters in the book. Perhaps that's as it should be.

Stipp writes that he aims "to provoke and delight." With carefully documented chapters about methodical earthworms, giddy rodents and birds that watch for predators while sleeping with one eye literally open, he hits his goal. Meanwhile, his book works as the subtlest of manifestos, a showcase for "the treasures we stand to lose" unless we do more about climate change.

His enthusiasm is wide-ranging and infectious. Dogs, Stipp writes, branched off from wolves at least 14,000 years ago – a moment, in evolutionary terms. Skunks have been around for at least 30 million years, perfecting the malodorous defense that sickens would-be prey. Which isn't to say that skunks savor their own smell. They "may well find their musk's odor repellent," also using it in fights amongst themselves.

Stipp's amiable prose makes complicated experiments easy to understand. Scientists determined that thiols, naturally produced sulfur-containing compounds, are the skunk's secret sauce. In doing so, researchers stunk up the joint. As cited by Stipp, a 19th century chemist's recalls the reaction to his work: "The whole college rose in revolt, shouting, 'A skunk, a skunk is here!' I had to abandon the investigation."



Timber Press / TNS

The book is full of consequential encounters between animals and people. Human intervention has changed rats – behaviorally and, in some cases, cosmetically. In Victorian England, "rat catchers began domesticating the brown rat," and today, breeders with questionable motives have engineered rats with curly hair and circular ears. Charles Darwin, who explained the idea of natural selection in his seminal "On the Origin of Species," labeled such tinkering "artificial selection."

More recently, Stipp writes, researchers studying rats' rough-and-tumble play have speculated that their chirps are an ancestral form of laughter, an evolved behavior employed to signal that their actions aren't threatening.

Stipp reminds us that Darwin's landmark work has been assailed as "an attack on the poetry of nature." He disagrees with this view: "Darwinism adds rather than subtracts,"(259) expanding "our focus of wonder to deeper enigmas." It's no surprise, then, that the book is most entertaining when Stipp peers at Darwin's beloved earthworms.

The British naturalist published a book about how worms spend their days – eating and excreting dead plants. Enriching soil planet-wide, few if any creatures "played so important a part in the history of the world," he wrote.

As Darwin sought to demonstrate that worms' systematic labors showed some degree of intelligence, he ran offbeat tests that Stipp relates with understated relish. Darwin, or someone assisting him, shouted at worms and played "shrill notes from a metal whistle," determining that they couldn't hear. Nor did he get a rise out of his worms when he "breathed on them while chewing tobacco," Stipp writes.

In this century, researchers have shown that worms seemingly communicate by touching one another. As these scientific heirs of Darwin demonstrate, "the glorious tangling of social behavior" surrounds us, Stipp writes. You'll know how to spot it thanks to this impressive book.

A woman reflects on the summer her life changed in 'Ripeness'

By MARION WINIK
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

In the arresting opening scene of Sarah Moss' new novel, "Ripeness," we meet Edith, 73, smushed beneath the substantial body of her once-a-week lover, a potter named Gunther.

Lines from Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" flit through her mind – "Every woman adores a Fascist" – leading to the reflection that Gunther is hardly a Fascist, unless "his politics are so far to the left he's come around the other side," his fierce dedication to veganism butting right against the border.

In the pages that follow, we will spend a great deal of time inside Edith's head, a busy place, swirling with interesting thoughts, some of which pop right out of her mouth, as in an early scene where she's thinking about whether a slice of sour cream cake she's sharing with her friend Méabh is Ukrainian or Jewish in origin (she is Jewish herself).

Moss' style runs the characters' thoughts and the spoken sentences together, without punctuation:

"She takes another spoonful. People who share recipes, who bake the same birthday cakes, stuff the same flatbreads with the same herbs, are perfectly capable of burning down each other's houses, raping each other's daughters and mutilating each other's sons. The evidence would suggest it's in all of us, both the baking and the bloodlust. What, says Méabh, it's just a cake, let's order another slice."

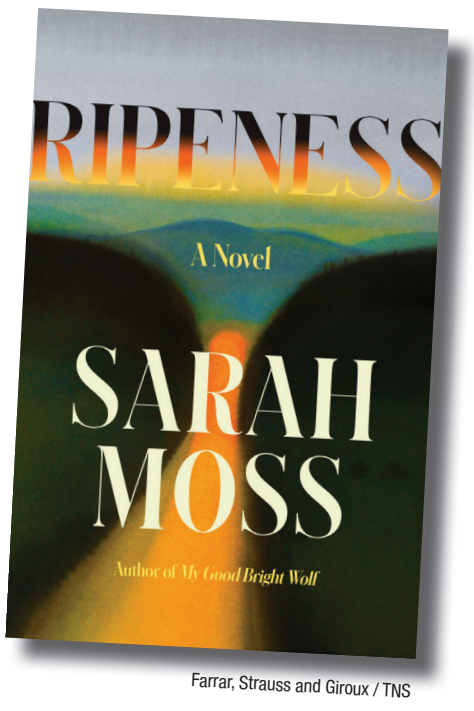
It's dizzying, but in a good way.

Along with Edith at 73, living in rural Ireland, we also meet Edith at 17, in a villa in Italy. In alternating chapters – presented as her first-person narrative – she tells the story of being sent to spend the summer with her sister Lydia, a ballerina, as Lydia awaited the birth of a baby she planned to give up for adoption. That pregnancy is a scandalous situation, perpetrated by the director of the corps de ballet, Igor, whom we hear about but never meet in person.

This younger Edith is just as prone as the elder to philosophical flights of the mind, which come fast and thick as she tries to take in the onslaught of new experiences the summer brings.

"Impossible to hold in one's head, in one's seventeen-year-old head, the idea that all the women in the village, all the humans in the bowl of the mountains, along the boot of Italy, across the continent of Europe – never mind the grass and the squirrels – have their own reality, are the central characters in their own worlds, that there are as many tragedies and comedies as entries in the census; I had not, of course, yet learnt that tragedy and comedy, plot and endings, are merely the tools of fiction, fairy tale. Ripeness, not readiness, is all."

Amid these reveries, much plot unfolds. An unexpected development in 73-year-old Edith's life turns out to be the inspiration for telling the story of her Italian summer, satisfyingly interlocking the two halves of the novel, and clearing the path toward the fraught but sturdy affirmation of life conveyed by its first and last word, which are both "Yes."



Farrar, Strauss and Giroux / TNS

College romances haunt narrator of witty 'Heart the Lover'

By CHRIS HEWITT
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

Publicity materials for "Heart the Lover" describe it as a novel about a romantic triangle, which strikes me as lazy and unworthy of this witty, insightful book.

Yes, the triangle is absolutely writer Lily King's favorite shape: Her " Euphoria " turned on the isosceles relationship between naturalist Margaret Mead and two men. And " Writers & Lovers " also dealt with a woman who's having trouble deciding between two (possibly three) men. But "Heart the Lover" is about grief and family much more than it's about whether Jordan, a novelist, will end up with one of two college sweethearts, Sam or Yash.

Jordan narrates in the present, looking back to several decades earlier, when she, Sam and Yash all studied literature. Now a novelist who is acclaimed for her insight into modern relationships (like King), Jordan's relationship with Sam was intense but brief whereas she and Yash made plans for the future, plans which were ruined by Yash's impulsive decision. Eventually, the book's timeline stays in the present, when Jordan is happily married (to whom, it's not immediately clear) and when a crisis unites the three college friends for an awkward, air-clearing reunion.

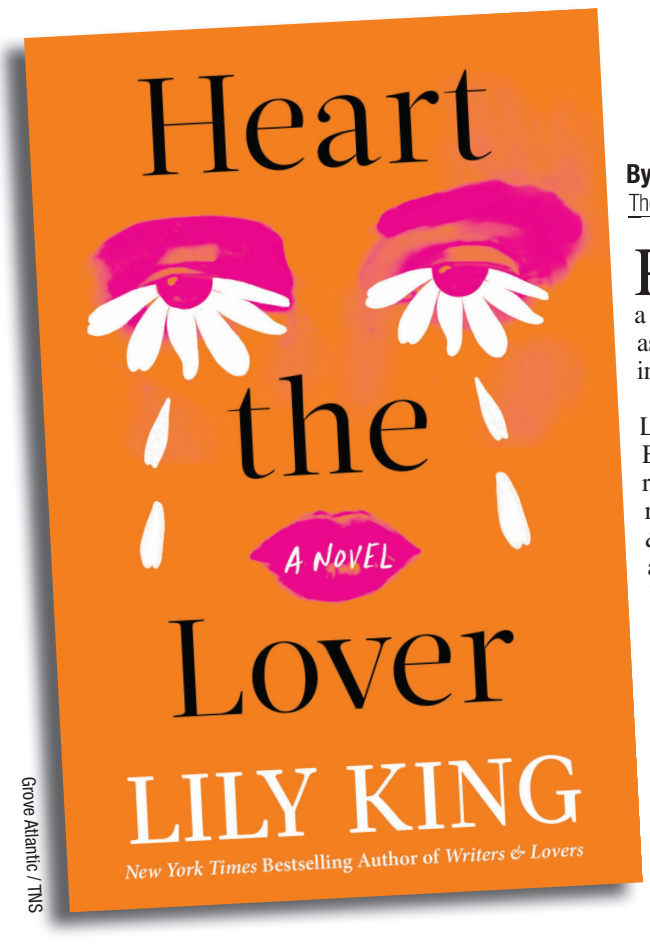
"Writers & Lovers" fans will want to know that "Heart the Lover" is in some ways a sequel, but it's best not to reveal exactly how since King takes her time with that revelation. Let's just say that whereas "Writers" was about a young person establishing a life, "Heart" is about trying to maintain that life: figuring out the impact of past relationships on present ones, settling into new roles with parents, guiding children through challenges.

King is smart about all of those topics and, especially, about how our attitudes can change; the looking-back structure of the novel means we're simultaneously aware of how young Jordan viewed her romance with Yash and how older, happier Jordan now sees it.

Both versions of Jordan are sharp, funny company. Her in-jokes with Yash and Sam are not off-putting because she shares with us the rules to their made-up card games and the meaning behind their secret nicknames for professors. Jordan's first-person narration is so observant and distinctive that we feel like we know her, which means King is able to employ the best kind of humor: amusing comments that are funny not because of what is said but because we can hear exactly how the characters are saying them.

It's not just the jokes that ring true. When Jordan's husband's voice fades out at the end of a phone conversation, she tells us "it feels like a premonition of the fact that someday, one by one, we will be separated from each other forever."

A couple of events in Jordan's life force her to reflect on the people who shaped it, people she knows will not always be around. At one point, in response to a friend's question about death, she offers a theory that's a lovely variation on that old faithful, the circle of life. Maybe that means King has a new favorite shape?



Grove Atlantic / TNS

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Oct. 4, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. Iron Flame (Wing and Claw Collection). Rebecca Yarros. Red Tower
2. Fourth Wing (Wing and Claw Collection). Rebecca Yarros. Red Tower
3. Alchemised. SenLinYu. Del Rey
4. The Secret of Secrets. Dan Brown. Doubleday
5. The Impossible Fortune. Richard Osman. Viking/Dorman
6. Vince Flynn: Denied Access. Don Bentley. Atria/Bestler
7. The Academy. Hilderbrand/Cunningham. Little, Brown
8. The Portrait. Danielle Steel. Delacorte
9. Tourist Season. Brynne Weaver. Slowburn
10. Circle of Days. Ken Follett. Grand Central

Hardcover nonfiction

1. 107 Days. Kamala Harris. Simon & Schuster
2. The Let Them Theory. Mel Robbins. Hay House
3. How to Make Money in any Market. James J. Cramer. Simon & Schuster
4. Poems & Prayers. Matthew McConaughey. Crown
5. Truly. Lionel Richie. HarperOne
6. Born Lucky. Leland Vittert. Harper Horizon
7. Strong Ground. Brené Brown. Random House
8. Good Things. Samin Nosrat. Random House
9. Confronting Evil. O'Reilly/Hammer. St. Martin's
10. The Devil Emails at Midnight. Mita Mallick. Wiley

Trade paperback

1. Burning Daylight. Emily McIntire. Bloom
2. Soul Searching. Lyla Sage. Dial
3. The Gingerbread Bakery. Laurie Gilmore. HarperCollins
4. The Surrogate Mother. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
5. The Mad Wife. Meagan Church. Sourcebooks Landmark
6. The Tenant. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
7. The Boyfriend. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
8. Holiday Ever After. Hannah Grace. Atria
9. Guardian Demon (deluxe ed.). Aurora Ascher. Kensington
10. Do Not Disturb. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

HOW CELEBRITY BOOK CLUBS ARE USING THEIR PLATFORM *to inspire a love of reading*

By EMILY ST. MARTIN
The Orange County Register (TNS)

Rodin Eckenroth / Getty Images for Hello Sunshine / Taco Bell / TNS

A guest attends an event for Reese's Book Club and Taco Bell at Casita Hollywood on May 25, 2024, in Los Angeles.

Film and music stars peddle booze, beauty, and everything in between.

But the hottest status symbol touted (and toted) by the modern-day it girl? A book.

It all started with Oprah Winfrey, the OG of the buzzy celebrity book club. She launched Oprah's Book Club on her eponymous talk show in 1996 and has since inspired a movement of celebrities sharing their love of reading with fans. Long gone are the days of zooming in on a paparazzi photo to discover what your favorite star is reading. Just check their Instagram!

While naysayers might roll their eyes at another celebrity hopping on the book club bandwagon, a recent study conducted by iScience found that the proportion of the U.S. population who read for pleasure on an average day declined over the last 20 years. From highs of 28 percent in 2004 to lows of 16 percent in 2023, the study indicates a relative decrease of 3 percent per year.

For bibliophiles, these numbers are alarming. For avid readers with serious social capital? It's a call to action.

Case in point: Reese Witherspoon was sick of the lack of female representation in stories that got the book-to-screen treatment. Natalie Portman believes becoming immersed in a story is a clear path toward empathy. Dua Lipa noticed the dwindling interest in libraries and wanted to reinvigorate discussions around reading. And Winfrey may have captured the collective intention of these celebrity book clubs best when she launched her own, saying, "I want to get the whole country reading again."

From Oscar-winning actors to morning news hosts and Grammy-winning pop stars, here are the celebrity book clubs that are inspiring their fans to read.

Oprah's Book Club

You get a book! You get a book. You get a book! "The Oprah Show" garnered around 48 million viewers weekly in the height of its popularity, and since Winfrey launched her groundbreaking book club in 1996, books selected for the monthly club have sold a combined 55 million copies.

Winfrey called the moment she launched her book club one of her all-time favorite moments on television. "When I was growing up, books were my friends. When I didn't have friends, I had books," she said on the episode that unleashed a movement. "I think that books open windows to the world for all of us."

Winfrey explained that she read "Deep End of the Ocean" by first-time novelist Jacquelyn Mitchard, and she loved it so much that she wanted to share it with her millions of viewers. "Those of you who haven't been reading, I think books are important. So this is what we're going to do: Y'all are going to have to buy it … you get one month, then we'll meet back here in a month and we'll talk about the book, just like they do in the reading clubs. Isn't that exciting? I love it!"

As of September, Winfrey has featured 118 monthly picks across nearly three decades and the vast majority of her picks shoot to best-seller status. Some of the books have stirred up headline-making controversies and scandals (Remember "A Million Little Pieces" by James Frey?) and some have been adapted into Oscar-winning films. Not only has Oprah's Book Club inspired millions to rush out to their local bookshops, it's giving readers plenty of juicy book gossip to discuss. (Remember "The Corrections" contretemps with Jonathan Franzen?)

Reese's Book Club

Reese Witherspoon is another top tastemaker with an immensely wide-reaching influence. In June 2017, she launched her book club, Reese's Book Club, in conjunction with her production company, Hello Sunshine. She selects a book each month that centers on stories about women, and she takes approximately 2-3 of those books to the screen each year.

The catalyst for launching such a venture? She said she was sick of getting lousy scripts. She told Graham Norton earlier this year that a script came across her desk around 2013 that was especially negative toward women. "I called my agent, and I said, 'This is the worst script I've ever read, and I'm not doing it.' And she said, 'Every actress in Hollywood wants to do this part.' And I thought, OK, well, if this is how bad the parts are for people who are really thriving in an industry, I gotta do better."

"I complained about it for a long time, and then I realized complaining doesn't help. And then I was like, 'What am I gonna do about it?' So I put my own money into a company, and I bought the first three books."

The books: "Gone Girl," by Gillian Flynn, "Wild" by Cheryl Strayed and "Big Little Lies" by Liane Moriarty. The venture has nabbed multiple Oscar nominations and eight Emmy Awards, launched many of the buzziest, yellow-sticker-donning bestsellers, and brought numerous stories about the female experience to the forefront of popular culture.

Belletrist

Emma Roberts and her bestie, Karah Preiss, launched Belletrist in 2017 after years of exchanging book recommendations via text and phone chats. "We bonded over a shared love of books and dark jokes," Roberts told BookClub in 2021. "What are other ways we can reclaim our power that don't involve murder?"

"What is Belletrist? In French, the rough translation is somebody who writes beautiful letters or words," Preiss added. "In English, it's our book club."

Roberts told Vogue in 2020 that Joan Didion agreed to be the Book Club's first author interview. "It made us feel special, for her to support two young women who are just trying to share stories with the world, and it gave us a solid foundation to start our community with."

Belletrist shares monthly book club picks, offers a subscription service through a collaboration with online bookseller Tertulia, and hosts online discussions with members, as well as author interviews. Recent book club picks include "Finding Grace" by Loretta Rothschild, "How to Lose Your Mother: A Daughter's Memoir," by Molly Jong-Fast and "Notes on Infinity: A Novel," by Austin Taylor.

Service95 Book Club by Dua Lipa

"If you're anything like me, books aren't just something that you read and put down. They stay with you. They're passports, mirrors, escape routes, secret maps for finding yourself or getting completely lost in the best way," Dua Lipa said in a YouTube video introducing her Service95 book club podcast.

Every month since the Service95 book club's inception in June 2023, Lipa has introduced members to a hand-selected book that made the pop star "laugh out loud, cry in public, rethink something that I thought I knew or just stayed with me long after the last page." She hosts the authors on her video podcast to discuss their work, and the guests have included National Book Award winner Patti Smith, "On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous" author Ocean Vuong, Pulitzer Prize winner Percival Everett, and more.

Lipa's admiration for storytellers is clearly mutual: celebrated authors Min Jin Lee, Hernan Diaz, Emma Cline, Douglas Stuart and Jennifer Clement showed up to dance the night away at Lipa's Radical Optimism tour stop at Madison Square Garden recently.

The "Levitating" hitmaker recently visited a reading group at HMP Downview, a women's prison in Surrey, England, as part of the Booker Prize Foundation's Books Unlocked program.

She told Harper's BAZAAR that the club was discussing "Shuggie Bain," by Douglas Stuart, which was also the first monthly pick for Service95. "There was also one lady in there that I think about often, and she was about 52 years old or something, and she said, 'Oh, had I maybe read books sooner in my life, maybe I wouldn't be here, because reading books has really made me understand people and humans and emotions.' Reading opens you up to the world. And it makes the world so much smaller."

Between Two Books

Florence Welch of the chart-topping rock band Florence & The Machine, insists she didn't start her book club Between Two Books. During a 2022 appearance on BBC One, she said it was her fans who launched the club. "Ten years ago, the Florence & The Machine community started a Twitter thread asking why I didn't have a book club. So they started it, and came up with a name, and I just joined in, 'I'd love to start a book club.'"

Welch started recommending books immediately, and in 2012, Between Two Books (a play on the group's hit song "Between Two Lungs") was born. According to the website, the club has grown into a vibrant online community, still led by original members, Kate and Leah, along with Florence, Maria and Terri-Jane.

The club also regularly features guest recommendations from artists, writers, musicians and directors such as Greta Gerwig, Nick Cave, Fiona Apple and Sally Rooney. The discussions take place across social media where the club features readings and Q&As with authors. Recent book club picks include "There Are Rivers In The Sky" by Elif Shafak, "Parable of the Sower" by Octavia Butler and "Never Let Me Go" by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Noname Book Club

Rapper Noname's international book club originated in a similar way as Between Two Books: through Twitter. The New York Times reported that in July 2019, the rapper posted a photo of the essay collection, "Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi," and a Twitter fan responded with a photo of the same book and a suggestion that they swap notes.

Shortly after that exchange, Noname Book Club was born. Each month, the club spotlights one book written by a Black author. "We believe building community through political education is crucial for our liberation," reads Noname's mission statement.

Since the club's founding in 2019, they've launched 20 book club chapters across the United States and several international chapters in London, Lagos, Accra, Toronto and Nairobi. In April 2021, Noname expanded the club's prison chapters and sent books to 1500 incarcerated members of the club. One especially cool aspect of Noname's book club is that members of various chapters around the world host in-person meetups to discuss the literature.

"I want people to think radically," the rapper told the NYT. Recent book club picks include "Sister Outsider" by Audre Lorde, "Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature" by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and "Krik? Krak!" by Edwidge Danticat.

Read with Jenna

Jenna Bush Hager has become a household name through her political lineage and more than 16 years as a correspondent and anchor on NBC's "The Today Show," most recently, "Today with Jenna & Friends." While both her father and grandfather were American presidents, her mother (former first lady Laura Bush) and both of her grandmothers were librarians.

She told People magazine earlier this year that her grandmothers didn't mess around when it came to the importance of reading, "I mean, my grandmother, Barbara Bush, had a sewn, needle-pointed pillow on her couch that said, 'Reading is sexy.' Which I've remade and put on my couch."

Naturally, Bush Hager would go on to launch a book club, Read with Jenna, in 2019 through "The Today Show." Bush Hager told Publishers' Weekly that the club originated after a dare from Libby Leist, EVP of Today and lifestyle at NBC Universal. "She had seen two conflicting articles, one of which said that people were reading more than ever, and the other saying that my generation wasn't reading," Bush Hager told the outlet. "I was like, 'I'm telling you, we're reading more, and people still love to read. So let me start a book club and see how it goes.' And the first book, 'The Last Romantics' by Tara Conklin, shot up on Amazon from basically oblivion to number two."

Since the club's inception, Read with Jenna has spotlighted more than 75 books, all of which Bush Hager has personally chosen. Recent book club picks include "Buckeye" by Patrick Ryan, "My Other Heart" by Emma Nanami Strenner and "Happy Wife" by Meredith Lavender and Kendall Shores.

TeaTime Book Club

Much like Reese Witherspoon, Dakota Johnson launched the TeaTime Book Club in tandem with her production company, TeaTime Pictures, which she co-founded with former Netflix development executive Ro Donnelly. The venture, which launched in 2024, was inspired by Johnson's search for stories to develop into films and TV shows, and features monthly book club picks that aim to spotlight debut writers and underrepresented stories. As for her favorite books, she admits she's a bit of a "book snob" and especially enjoys literary fiction.

The "Materialists" star told Bustle last year that TeaTime isn't exactly like the other celebrity book clubs. "I've found in book clubs that you're just kind of on your own. You watch someone like me have a conversation with the author, but I don't feel invested in that. I'm not very good at Instagram, and I am constantly trying to figure it out, but the more I've learned and seen, something like this is really needed. People need to deep dive into knowledge about specific things rather than talking about what f— face serum they're using and thinking that that's the most important thing in the world."

Rather than host author Q&As, Johnson likes to post "deep dive" lists on Instagram for each of the club's monthly picks, which include adjacent books, watch lists, and even playlists curated by authors, which Johnson also shares via Spotify. Recent TeaTime picks include "The Dilemmas of Working Women," by Fumio Yamamoto, "Make Your Way Home" by Carrie R. Moore and "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" by Douglas Adams.

Nat's Book Club

Natalie Portman launched her Instagram-exclusive book club, Nat's Book Club, in 2021. While the Oscar-winning actor has a more low-key approach to the celebrity book club – her club operates sans fancy stickers, collaborations with booksellers, etc. – her mission reflects those of her peers in the A-list literati.

"I believe that reading books is one of the first ways we start practicing empathy," a note from Portman reads on the club's website. "We feel for characters in stories as we might for ourselves or our own friends. Whenever we imagine someone else's life – their hopes and fears, their feelings and thoughts – we are practicing empathy. I try to find books that deepen our understanding of ourselves and of the world around us. Seeing yourself reflected in characters can be just as eye-opening as empathizing with a character who you might not readily identify with. At the same time, I also believe non-fiction has an important role in shaping our culture and thinking."

Portman posts a selfie with her book club pick each month, passages from the monthly selection, as well as interviews with authors via the club's Instagram. Recent book club picks include "No Straight Road Takes You There" by Rebecca Solnit, "A Different Kind of Power" by Jacinda Ardern and "The English Understand Wool" by Helen DeWitt.

Library Science

Kaia Gerber launched her book club, Library Science, alongside former Vanity Fair contributor Alyssa Reeder. According to the book club's website, the project "aims to highlight books that aren't on the typical bestseller lists in order to better support debut writers, new voices, and overlooked / underrepresented stories." The club hosts conversations both online and at in-person events.

"I've been an avid reader pretty much my whole life," Gerber told the Associated Press last year. "And during the pandemic, I started an online book club conversation on Instagram, and then it grew from there. I started to foster this incredible community of readers and authors, and now it has its own platform. I feel so fortunate that I get to have these incredible conversations with authors that I admire so much, and I think it's opened up the conversation to some big topics that, you know, sometimes are hard to broach … I'm so grateful anytime someone says they read a book that I recommended, it's like the highest compliment that someone can give me."

The club explores works of fiction, translations, essays, plays, and poetry, with a focus on reading "that could provoke larger conversations around sex, love, girlhood, queerness, grief, addiction, beauty, being."

The club's aim is to encourage more people to discuss literature. And Gerber, the daughter of supermodel Cindy Crawford and a model herself, doesn't mince words if people come to the Library Science comment section to stray from the discussion of books: "The dichotomy of appearance-based comments under a video of two women having an in-depth conversation about being perceived and projected onto the world? the irony is not lost on me ... if you viewed women as more than just a physical vessel for your own projections, you could get something valuable out of a conversation like this. thank you for validating my point, and please rewatch this clip with the volume turned all the way up."

Recent book club picks include "The Post-Office Girl" by Stefan Zweig (translated from German by Joel Rotenberg), "Bonjour Tristesse" by Francoise Sagan and "Set My Heart on Fire" by Izumi Suzuki.

AUTOMOTIVE

Ten years after prototype, anti-drunken driving tech ready for rollout

By GRANT SCHWAB
The Detroit News (TNS)

Grant Schwab / The Detroit News / TNS

A demo of a DADSS passive breath-based alcohol detection system. The breath intake device and sensor is on the vertical steering column.

LEESBURG, Virginia — Ten years after unveiling a prototype, a key public-private research effort is taking a major leap toward getting its advanced alcohol detection technology into the hands of the country's top auto manufacturers.

"We've converted a wild, audacious idea that everybody thought would fail – people laughed us out of the room – into a viable technology suite," said Rob Strassburger, president and CEO, Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety.

"I might just break down and start crying," he said of the 10th anniversary. "This has been a very challenging effort, and a very interesting effort, technologically and scientifically. But we have never lost sight of why we're doing this."

Strassburger's group is home to the Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety project, or DADSS. The parentally nicknamed project has worked with Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the federal government and automakers in an effort to develop technology solutions to someday end the deadly plague of drunken driving on American roads.

DADSS, according to Strassburger, is at a critical and exciting juncture. The project is in the long-planned process of licensing some technology out to vehicle and parts manufacturers, who will be able to study the sophisticated infrared light-based sensors, integrate them into future vehicles and improve upon the designs.

"We're at an inflection point where we should not hang on to this technology any longer," Strassburger said in an interview. He announced the move toward licensing at a MADD event in September: "We should be handing off to product integrators, OEMs and safety system suppliers, and that's exactly what we're doing."

The latest phase comes as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the nation's top road safety regulator, weighs the implementation of a 2021 congressional directive to mandate anti-drunken driving technology in all new passenger vehicles. That directive was borne out of a bipartisan push and named for a Michigan family of five killed in a drunken-driving crash in 2019.

The agency has not yet drafted rules on the topic, missing lawmakers' stated target for implementation. Advocates said last month, however, that they have renewed optimism and excitement.

They cited encouraging conversations with the Trump administration and an announcement from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety that the group will soon consider impaired driving prevention tech as part of its influential vehicle safety ratings.

"Once systems like DADSS are out there, then that's what you're going to need in order to get the top rating," said Chuck Farmer, vice president of research at IIHS.

The law does not prescribe one specific technology for the NHTSA regulations. It left the door open for camera-based driver monitoring systems, exterior cameras and sensors, alcohol detection systems or others. Beyond DADSS, MADD pointed to several auto suppliers that have worked on applicable technologies, including Seeing Machines, Smart Eye AB, Valeo, Bosch and Magna International Inc.

Tech advances

The DADSS project is a collaboration between NHTSA and ACTS, the nonprofit Strassburger leads. The effort officially began in 2008. Since then, DADSS engineers have worked on developing detection systems that are both highly accurate and minimally invasive – and that would someday be widely available across the auto industry.

DADSS has pursued two technology tracks in its 17 years of research: breath-based and touch-based. Both rely on infrared spectroscopy – essentially shining lasers at the breath or skin – to determine the concentration of alcohol molecules.

The breath-based systems, for now, are further along in development. They include an "active" type that requires a weak-but-directed puff of air toward a sensor that quickly measures a driver's blood-alcohol levels. The sensor can be built into a vehicle's steering column and does not require a plastic attachment tube, like classic breathalyzers. DADSS has already commercialized that system.

Crucially for industry adoption, DADSS has also developed a passive system that captures ambient breath from the driver and makes a reading without requiring any change to behavior. The reading is completed in the time it takes to enter a vehicle and put on the seat belt.

That less invasive system is in the final stages of commercialization. DADSS has begun sending out reference designs and engineering kits to manufacturers, including drawings, bills of materials and other documentation for auto companies to integrate third-party systems into their vehicles, or manufacture the technology themselves.

He likened the reference design to the classic USB plugs most people are familiar with. Many companies manufacture USB ports and cables, but there are widely used parameters.

The breath-based system is 99.9997 percent accurate, according to Strassburger, up from the 90s or high 80s a decade ago when the group's prototype launched. He said the final 0.0097 percent was the hardest to achieve, but that DADSS engineers are well attuned to concerns from consumers and the auto industry that their vehicles could register false positives.

The group has also focused on other important factors that would make the technology commercially viable, like making it more resilient to temperature extremes in vehicle cabins, sturdier for bumps and shocks that happen during driving, and smaller so it can fit easily – and cheaply – into vehicles.

"This must be able to be mass produced in automotive quantities, and live in a car for the life of that car, which we set at, like, 187,500 miles," said Strassburger, a 1981 engineering graduate from the University of Michigan who has worked in the auto industry since then.

He estimated the current cost of the passive breath-based system at $200 to $250 per vehicle, and predicted the cost would come down with greater scale in production.

"One of the principal reasons why we chose infrared spectroscopy is that the development arc ultimately leads to a system on a chip. We need a lot more investment to get to that point, but this (system) will all be a little computer chip someday," Strassburger said.

DADSS has also made significant advances with its touch-based technology since the project's inception. The system used to be close to the size of a full vehicle dashboard, requiring dozens of wire bundles connected to computer boards and sensors. Now the technology fits into a package roughly the size of a small jewelry box.

That system, while promising, is still not ready for commercialization. Strassburger said it also faces an uncertain future if NHTSA stops funding DADSS.

The project had a budget of about $14 million last year, up from $1 million in its first year. The total investment in the project since its inception has been approximately $167 million, with about 75 percent of the funding coming from the federal government and 25 percent from automakers.

Strassburger acknowledged that DADSS was never meant to be a permanent initiative and is searching for an industry partner to take over the ongoing development of the touch-based system. He said, however, that has been a challenge given headwinds in the auto industry, citing competition from China, tariffs and sweeping regulatory changes under the Trump administration.

"I would love to find an industry partner. And if I can, fantastic. But I also understand that the government itself has its challenges," Strassburger said.

Is the world ready?

The Alliance for Automotive Innovation, the industry's top lobbying group, has been cautious about the deployment of anti-drunken driving technology in vehicles before the drivers are ready.

"How the rules and regulations get implemented will impact consumer acceptance. Consumer acceptance is required for the technology to have the most impact and save the most lives," the group wrote in a 2024 one-pager when NHTSA was seeking public comment on potential rules.

"Nobody should ever drive while impaired. Ever. Impaired driving weighs heavily on automakers," the alliance said in a statement. "Automakers continue to make major investments in research, development and testing of drunk and impaired driving technology as well as crashworthiness and crash avoidance systems to help improve safety on the roads."

He continued: "For more than a decade, this has included a major investment in the DADSS program. With support from NHTSA and others in the safety community, the auto industry has helped advance the development of this lifesaving technology."

The lobbying organization has conducted consumer surveys on the topic but has yet to publish its latest findings. Surveys from other groups, like the IIHS and academic researchers, suggest that two-thirds to three-quarters of U.S. drivers support the inclusion of technology in vehicles to prevent impaired driving.

Farmer, of IIHS, also pointed to an August 2025 study on driver attitudes toward Subaru Corp.'s Driver Focus driver monitoring system. Study participants expressed mostly positive sentiments about the technology.

"Most drivers agreed that they would want the system again (70 percent), and those who drove with it on agreed it made them a safer driver (64 percent) and helped them avoid distractions (63 percent). Receiving too many alerts and annoyance were the top reasons cited by the 4 percent of drivers who turned the system off under their profile settings," the study said.

Stephanie Manning, MADD's head of government affairs, acknowledged some of the concerns she hears about most with the DADSS technology and other systems: data privacy, false positives and cost.

"I think there are bigger issues that need to be discussed regarding consumer privacy. I'm an advocate for consumer privacy. I agree that we all have an unsettled feeling about the data that is shared about us and our loved ones through lots of different mechanisms every single day," Manning said.

But she added: "Anti-drunk driving technology is not going to make that any better or any worse. It is a neutral addition that is going to save more than 10,000 lives every year and prevent hundreds of thousands of serious injuries. We don't want anyone's data to be collected, shared, stored or sold. This is purely a prevention tool."

On false positives, Strassburger noted that the DADSS technology can – and perhaps should – be conservatively set so it does not capture trace amounts of alcohol. He also noted that the technology can take multiple readings.

"Nothing's perfect," he said. "There will be false positives and there will be false negatives. In our testing, we have set up the sensor to minimize false positives, and with that, we project an effectiveness in the 70 percent range, meaning a 70 percent reduction in drunk driving fatalities."

Strassburger also noted that DADSS has tested its technology with vehicle fleet partners in Virginia, Connecticut, Washington and Maryland. He said that was "invaluable" for improving the technology and finding edge cases that improperly trigger positive readings, like monk fruit sweeteners and certain vape cartridges.

On cost concerns, Manning pointed to the IIHS safety rating announcement and the potential for a NHTSA mandate on the horizon. "Cost will come down significantly. And, you know, OMB and DOT set a price on a human life," she said, referring to the latest $13.7 million value of a statistical life figure.

Manning added: "When you look at the number of people killed and seriously injured, there's no question that this rule should move forward."

Strassburger expressed a similar sentiment about the technology. He has continued leading the DADSS effort despite battling Stage 4 cancer.

"Everybody in the last couple of years has asked me, 'Well, Rob, why haven't you retired?'" he said. "And I tell people: It's because I've been at this so long, and because there's so much at stake here."

AUTO REVIEW

2025 Acura ZDX is back with EV revenge

By MARC D. GRASSO
Boston Herald (TNS)

Marc Grasso / Boston Herald / TNS

2025 Acura ZDX Type-S

MSRP: $73,500

MPGe: 83 city / 74 highway / 78.4 as tested

As Tested: $75,200

As someone who owned an original Acura ZDX back in 2010, I believe the historically ugly crossover SUV failed due to its futuristic design and coupe-like tail, which was years ahead of its time. Now consumers love coupe-shaped SUVs and are gaga for the German automakers' stylish designs.

The ZDX name plate is back for 2025, but this time as an all-electric five-passenger SUV with one of the smoothest rides I have ever experienced.

Utilizing General Motors Ultium platform, shared with the Cadillac Lyriq and Chevrolet Blazer EV, the Acura ZDX is outstanding. Its Orchid White interior was so plush, so comfortable, I imagined myself in my 1967 Pontiac Grand Prix Convertible or even my worn-in sofa. To say the ride was exceptional is an understatement.

Our 2025 Acura ZDX Type-S tester was wrapped in Double Apex Blue Pearl, which is a real standout. Powering the Ultium platformed Acura ZDX, is a dual-electric all-wheel drive 102 kWh battery with 190 kWh DC fast charging. We showed 302 miles on a full charge, while the ratings called for 278 miles. Monstrous yellow Brembo brake calipers were also visible, giving the yellow-accent color a real flare. Additionally, 22-inch wheels and adaptive air-suspension were standard. Heads-up display, an 11.3-inch color touchscreen and 11-inch digital instrument cluster were also standard on the ZDX Type-S.

Acura remains a top brand in Grasso's Garage, as their vehicles continue to deliver excellence in styling, comfort and design. And power is never understated. The Acura ZDX delivers 499 horsepower and 544 pound-feet of torque. This combination delivers a 0-60 time of 4.3 seconds. As the most comfortable SUV I have ever experienced, the nicest exterior of any EV in the market today, the Acura ZDX is a chart-topper in the high-performance EV SUV class. This one is a real winner, and if I am ever going to own an EV, this will easily be the one!

TECHNOLOGY

2025's best robot vacuums

By CNET.COM (TNS)

No matter how big or small your home is, cleaning is often an unpleasant and time-consuming chore, even if you have a good vacuum cleaner.

That's what makes robot vacuums a game-changer.

Although it's not the most affordable option when compared with a cordless vacuum, new technology showcased at IFA 2025 is making robot vacuums more capable than ever, with the ability to climb a full flight of stairs, robotic arms that can grasp objects, better navigation and object recognition, and automatic refilling and emptying for their base stations.

To pick the best robot vacuum machines, we performed hands-on lab testing on nearly 100 models, thoroughly evaluating each on its mopping and carpet performance, how well it avoided obstacles (including pet messes), docking stations, sensors, battery life, reliability and the overall value. These are the top three models we recommend, based on our experience with what each one does best.

The following CNET staff contributed to this story: CNET Editor Ajay Kumar, and Managing Copy Editor Nick Hide. For more reviews of personal technology products, please visit www.cnet.com.

Ecovacs Deebot T30S Combo

Best robot vacuum overall

CNET TAKE: The Ecovacs Deebot T30S Combo may look like a gimmick, adding a cordless stick vac to the Omni Station. Our lab testing shows that this is not the case. Instead, the Deebot T30S has become our top recommendation. It's a great option for people who want a robot vacuum and stick vacuum in one unit without compromising performance. It offers strong performance on both hardwood and carpet, supports mopping and has a self-emptying base station.

At $1,200, it's not the cheapest option, but it's less than newer products from Dreame and Roborock. If you think about it, you're also getting a cordless stick vacuum and robot vacuum and mop in one device. Like many vacuums, you can often find it on sale.

The Ecovacs Deebot T30S Combo.
Ecovacs / CNET / TNS

Eufy / CNET / TNS
The Eufy E20 3-in-1.

Eufy E20 3-in-1

Best value robot vacuum

CNET TAKE: The Eufy E20 3-in-1 robot vacuum is one of the most distinct robovacs we've tested. Unlike the Ecovacs, the E20 doesn't have mopping capabilities, but it's still a very capable and easy-to-use robot vacuum and cordless vacuum. We like it for the total flexibility it offers by giving you a robovac, handheld and stick vac in one unit with solid performance on different floor types.

What earns the E20 a place on our list is the sheer value it offers. It's $549 at full price, but you can often find it on sale for $350. For the price, you get a robot vacuum with a self-emptying dock, a stick vacuum and a handheld vacuum all in one. Its closest competitor with the same features, the Deebot T30S Combo, will cost you nearly double this price.

Yeedi M12 Pro Plus

Best robot vacuum and mop combo and runner-up best value

CNET TAKE: Yeedi may not be a brand you've heard of, but it's actually a sister company of Ecovacs, which has earned a number of picks on our list over the years. The Yeedi M12 Pro Plus is a very capable robot vacuum and mop that comes with a docking station. Its performance on hardwood floors was particularly impressive – the best of any robot vacuum we tested.

The Yeedi M12 Pro Plus.
Yeedi / CNET / TNS

The robot kept a very tight path around our complicated table setup, hit the corners well, and missed very few spots. Notably, it also supports multi-level mopping, which is a nice feature you don't always get on non-flagship vacuums. The mopping pad is even pressurized, giving you a bit more elbow grease when cleaning.

Pet hair also proved not to be a problem, with the M12 Pro Plus picking up nearly all the pet hair from hardwood and carpet in our tests. It's currently priced at $380 on Yeedi's website, making it quite the steal for the performance.

GADGETS

Home security system

The SimpliSafe base station.
Photos by SimpliSafe / TNS

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Security can't be overstated. It's critical, and a home security system is something people think they might not need, until it's needed and unfortunately too late.

The SimpliSafe home security system is precisely that, simple and safe. It's a complete system, which can be as simple as a single camera or expanded to every door, window and room in your home. There are different packages depending on your needs for inside and outside security. Or go à la carte based on your coverage needs.

First and foremost, security is a serious matter, and getting it right on the first try is critical. Knowing that, my personal preference is that more is better. Add to that, with the SimpliSafe system, you can easily install it yourself. Of course, you can seek professional help, but I've seen devices way simpler than this, with an installation that frustrated me beyond belief. From start to finish, the SimpliSafe home security system can easily be self-installed in a few hours or less.

SimpliSafe's Lighthouse package ($241.43) is what I tested. It includes a base station, keypad, wireless indoor camera, wired video doorbell, an outdoor camera, a motion sensor and three entry sensors. Everything feels well-made and durable, with the outdoor pieces being weather-resistant.

To help determine what system works for you, the SimpliSafe website has a "Take Our Quiz" link. There, you choose the type of property you are setting up and what equipment is recommended. You'll enter information such as how many doors and windows you have and what kind of protection you desire, along with a monitoring recommendation.

The base station is the central piece of hardware and the brain for the SimpliSafe system. All the cameras and sensors route through the base station, which is a space-saving cylinder-shaped device. Once a break-in is detected, the base station alerts the monitoring center and then broadcasts a 95dB siren. And if you're wondering how loud that is, a quick Google search told me, "Yes, 95 dB is a loud and potentially damaging noise level."

Inside the base station is cellular technology with a SIM card. It gets activated once you choose a monitoring system. It also has Wi-Fi, so if cellular is out in the area or Wi-Fi is down, it can resort to one system or the other. There is a backup battery to run for up to 24 hours in the event of a power outage. Up to 100 sensors can run off a single base station.

Upon entering your home, the keypad must be within reach to shut the alarm system off, so placement near your most common door of entry is recommended. It doesn't require AC power. It is built with SmashSafe, so if an intruder decides to smash the keypad hoping to deactivate the alarm, they are out of luck. Once it's smashed, your system will still alert the authorities.

Motion sensors are critical, especially if you don't have entry sensors on every door and window. They provide a 90-degree field of view with a 35-foot range for entire room coverage, triggering an alarm upon detection of any unusual movement. They will detect people and not pets.

The motion sensitivity, like all the controls, is set and adjusted in the SimpliSafe app. You can arm and disarm the system within the app (iOS and Android), along with setting up notifications to your smartphone. Videos, both stored and live, can be viewed within the app.

Once your system is installed, there are several monitoring plans to choose from. They start as low as $1.10 per day for a basic plan, up to $2.66 per day.

Among the choices is the Pro Plus monitoring plan, which includes the Core plan plus SimpliSafe Active Guard Outdoor Protection. It covers you day and night. Advanced AI detects possible threats, and the live security agents intervene to stop intruders.

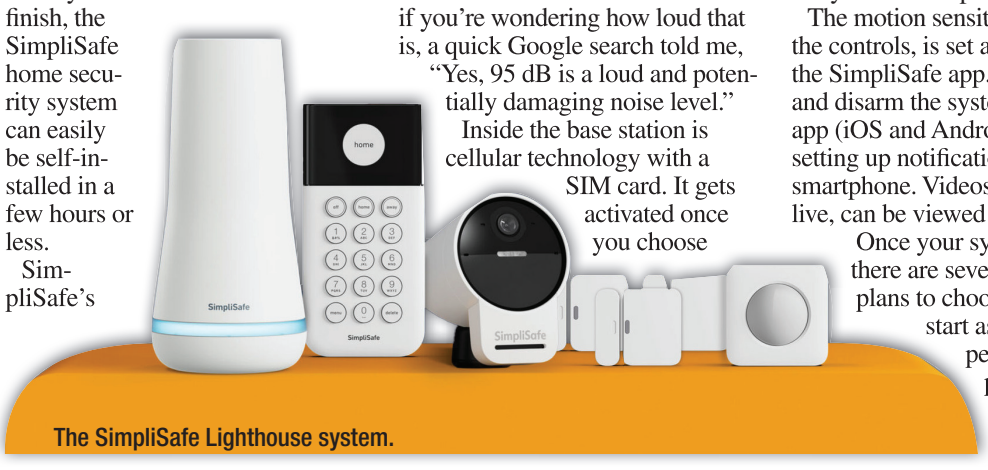
After seeing the threat through the outdoor camera, the possible intruder will be spoken to directly, along with having a siren sounded and the spotlight shone on them. The goal of the Active Guard Outdoor Protection is to react to threats in under 30 seconds, aiming to prevent break-ins and crime.

With the system's Familiar Face technology, people whose faces are saved to the account will not trigger an alarm. But those who are unrecognizable will be engaged by the SimpliSafe agents. Other accessories for the system include a glass-break sensor, a smoke and carbon monoxide detector, a temperature sensor and a water sensor.

You should check with your city, as many require an alarm permit to respond to an alarm, which is not included in a monitoring fee.

https://simplisafe.com

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.



The SimpliSafe Lighthouse system.

Calls not ringing? Check Do Not Disturb mode

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

I received this email from a reader last week:

"I have an IPhone XR, which has stopped ringing on incoming calls. (If someone calls), it goes immediately into voice mail. The call also does not show up on my Apple Watch and texts do not ring. I have done everything, including spending an hour on a chat with Apple (to no avail).

"I made an appointment with Apple's Genius Bar. The gentleman helping me flipped a few switches, called me and the phone rang. I came home and again calls did not ring. If someone calls and immediately calls me a second time, the phone will ring.

"Could it have something to do with Apple's update IOS 18.6.2?"

The software update may have had something to do with this issue, especially if this is new behavior since the update.

There are several things that could silence your ringing and notifications, but when the reader mentioned the second call ringing through, that made the answer obvious.

The symptoms you describe point to "Do Not Disturb" mode being enabled.

Do Not Disturb is turned on or off by swiping down from the upper right corner of the screen to bring up the control center. Then tap the Focus button and choose Do Not Disturb.

When DND is enabled, you'll see a small crescent moon icon next to the clock on top of your screen.

DND is a nice way to limit the disturbances when you need to concentrate or need some silence. There are options you can configure to allow calls or messages from certain people or notifications from certain apps to ring through, while blocking everything else.

By default, DND blocks every interruption unless you put some people or apps on the "notifications allowed" lists. If there are only a few people that you'd like to silence, you can also choose to create a "Silence Calls From" list instead.

You can also choose to allow rings from contacts on your favorites list.

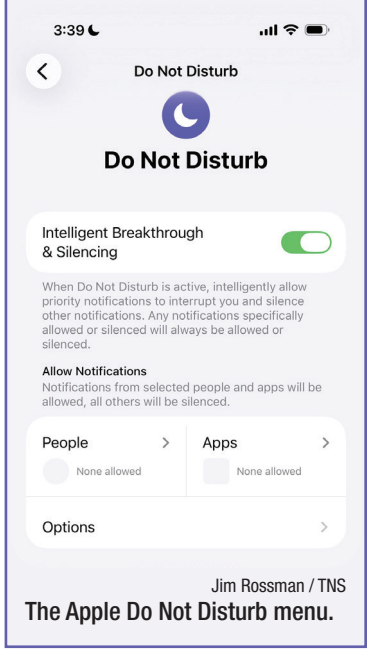
One of the tell-tale features of DND is the option to allow a second call from the same person within three minutes to ring through.

I asked the reader to check Do Not Disturb and to check if the DND mode was set to be activated on a schedule.

In a follow up with the reader, she mentioned Do Not Disturb mode had been scheduled for late nights, but when she checked again, the schedule had reverted to enable DND from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. That's what was causing the calls not to ring during the day.

Android phone users also have a similar Do Not Disturb mode.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantech adviser@gmail.com.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Do Not Disturb
Do Not Disturb
Intelligent Breakthrough & Silencing
When Do Not Disturb is active, intelligently allow priority notifications to interrupt you and silence other notifications. Any notifications specifically allowed or silenced will always be allowed or silenced.
Allow Notifications
Notifications from selected people and apps will be allowed, all others will be silenced.
People
None allowed
Apps
None allowed
Options

Jim Rossman / TNS
The Apple Do Not Disturb menu.

HOME&GARDEN

DESIGN RECIPES

Using fall colors

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Fall is here and brown, orange, and green are classic fall colors, that can help infuse warmth and comfort into your home décor. When used thoughtfully, these hues can make a home feel cozy and stylish without being overwhelming.

Here are some dos and don'ts for using classic fall colors.

Do

■ Do layer different shades. Combine burnt orange, rust, terracotta, chocolate brown, and forest or sage green to create depth and richness.

■ Do pair with neutrals. Pair fall colors with neutral colors such as cream, beige or taupe.

■ Do infuse texture. Materials like wood, leather, wool and woven fibers work beautifully with earthy, fall tones.

■ Do add accents and accessories. Try orange or green pillows, throws or accents to refresh a room with subtle changes.

■ Do incorporate metallics. Copper, bronze or antique gold accents can add a glow that enhances the warmth of fall colors.

Don't

■ Don't let the palette get too dark. Too much brown or deep green can feel heavy.

■ Don't use colors that are overly bright. Instead use colors with gray undertones for a more muted look and feel.

■ Don't forget balance. Mix warm hues with cooler tones in order create a sense of color balance.

■ Don't overuse patterns. Plaids, florals and prints in these earth shades work well when paired with neutral solid colors.

■ Don't limit these colors to autumn. Brown, orange and green can transition into year-round palettes when used thoughtfully and purposefully.

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassive house.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."

Handout photos / TNS

A living room layered with shades of green, natural textures, and touches of gold for a rich, inviting feel.

A cozy daybed accented with orange and yellow pillows, brings seasonal warmth into a light-filled room.

A modern living area combines earthy orange chairs with neutral furnishings and layered textures.

Scott Gabriel Morris / TNS

A living room with chocolate accents and warm neutrals.

A playful family space where warm rust tones and patterned pillows add comfort and personality.

Should I install radiant flooring?

By ANGIE HICKS
Ask Angi (TNS)

Imagine stepping out of a hot shower on a cold winter morning, and instead of bracing for the icy jolt of tile underfoot, you're greeted by warm, gentle heat rising from the floor.

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

For many homeowners, radiant bathroom flooring isn't just a luxury; it's one of those small daily comforts that quietly change how you experience your home. And with rising interest in energy efficiency and smart home upgrades, it's no surprise that more people are considering radiant floor heating as a serious enhancement to traditional HVAC systems.

Dreamstime / TNS

Special tubing laid beneath floors, seen here during installation, provides the heat for radiant systems.

Radiant floor heating works by installing a heating element directly beneath your bathroom floor, warming the space from the ground up. There are two main types: electric systems, which use thin mats embedded with heated cables, and hydronic systems, which circulate hot water through tubes beneath the floor. Both deliver a slow, steady heat that evenly warms the entire room, with no vents, drafts or cold corners.

Electric systems are generally easier to install in small areas and cost between $8 and $15 per square foot. Hydronic systems can range from $6 to $20 per square foot and are often more economical for larger or whole-home installations.

One of the biggest advantages of radiant heat is its even distribution. Traditional forced-air systems tend to push warm air quickly into a space and then shut off, which often leaves the ceiling toasty while your feet stay cold. Radiant heat, on the other hand, warms the entire surface area of the floor and naturally radiates upward, keeping the temperature consistent and comfortable from bottom to top. It's also surprisingly efficient in small spaces like bathrooms, especially when paired with a programmable thermostat. Radiant systems often use less energy than conventional heating systems, and many homeowners report noticeable savings on utility bills over time.

Beyond the efficiency, radiant floor heating offers an impressive lifespan with very little maintenance. Once installed properly, a radiant system can last up to 40 years, which is nearly three times longer than the average forced-air furnace. There are no filters to replace, no ducts to clean and no noisy components. Everything stays tucked away under the floor, silent and invisible, which is especially appealing in bathrooms where space is limited and design matters.

Of course, there are tradeoffs. The most significant hurdle for many homeowners is the installation process. To add radiant heat, you'll need to remove your existing flooring so the system can be placed underneath, which adds labor time and cost. For hydronic systems, you may also need a concrete or mortar base to hold the tubing in place, which can further complicate installation. Repairs, while rare, can be tricky. If something goes wrong, you'll need a pro to locate and fix the issue, and that often means pulling up flooring again.

Then there's the price tag. Installing a radiant system in a bathroom typically costs between $1,700 and $6,000. That's a steep upfront cost compared to other heating methods, but many homeowners find the long-term savings and comfort make it worthwhile.

Still, if you're already planning to renovate your bathroom, radiant heat is a smart upgrade to factor in. The installation is easiest when the flooring is already being replaced, and the added comfort and efficiency can make your bathroom feel like a high-end spa every day. Plus, it's a strong selling point that can boost your home's value down the road.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.

TRAVEL

Christopher Reynolds / The Los Angeles Times / TNS

The homes and inns surrounding Lake George, in the Adirondacks region of New York, draws legions of families on return visits each summer.

The vacation spots you keep returning to, from *Zion* to the *'very best beach'* in Hawaii

By CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — There are times when you want a vacation that challenges you. But there are other times when you crave a familiar scene, a traveler's version of comfort food.

What is it that brings people back to the same destination again and again?

Charlotte Russell, a Manchester-based clinical psychologist and founder/editor of the Travel Psychologist blog, didn't see value in visiting the same place twice when she was in her 20s, but as she got older, her opinion changed.

Now one of her most frequent destinations is Seville, a short, direct flight from her home airport. However, her travel cadence is strategic. "I don't want to spoil the connection I have to the place by visiting too frequently," she says. "For me, once every few years seems to be about 'right.'" Once there, she savors "the beautiful buildings, the orange trees, the smells and flavors of the food," enjoying the chance to get to know the culture more deeply than a one-time visitor might.

Then again, Russell acknowledges, maybe we can never truly visit the same place twice.

So says psychology professor Andrew Stevenson in his 2023 book "The Psychology of Travel." In his view, "places change all the time, and so do we. Yes, we can visit the same location again, but are likely to experience it in a completely different way when visiting again, as the place becomes more meaningful, more full of memories, more vital, each new time we arrive."

We asked Southern California readers to tell us about their most prized repeat destinations. The answers took us all over – Hawaii, Utah, Arizona, England and Hermosa Beach, for instance – for all sorts of reasons they share with us below.

London keeps calling

Tommy Bui of Pacoima studied in the United Kingdom as an undergrad – "a very impressionable and long influential time of my life," he wrote.

"It was my first time away from home with veritably just a meagre bindle on my back. I was way out of my comfort zone and flung into the deep end on the other side of the pond. I floundered but eventually found my water legs and learned to love dear ol' Blighty." [That's a slang phrase for Great Britain often used by British expats.]

So, Bui continued, "every year I manage to lumber my way back to London." Aiming to "recapture that initial wonderment and whimsy," he's been going back for more than 10 years, always looking for "some kind of new and out-of-my-comfort-zone mischief."

These adventures have included "running the 2024 London Marathon (whilst guiding a sight-impaired runner), riding a penny-farthing [Victorian-era bicycle] to Buckingham Palace, and cycling 100 miles from London to Essex to raise money for the Alzheimer's Society," Bui wrote.

"What makes London special is that the magic of that first visit is undiminished with each subsequent visit somehow."

Between California mountains and Mexican beaches

Brandon Luna of Long Beach wrote to say his family has been making repeat visits to two very different spots over the last eight years. One is Yosemite.

"I grew up in Merced, the 'Gateway to Yosemite,' but had never visited the national park until I lived in Southern California," Luna wrote. "It's great to take my kids and pitstop in Merced to visit my family. We love staying at the Yosemite Valley Lodge. Its convenient location makes it easy for us to explore without driving. We were fortunate enough to get snowed in one year!"

His family's other top spot: "La Costalegre in Jalisco is an area south of Puerto Vallarta," Luna wrote. "It's more of a locals' (Mexican) tourist destination, with some visitors and expats from Canada and the U.S. We rent a car and drive from the outskirts of Guadalajara to the towns of Melaque/San Patricio. We love to hang out at the beach all day, hit the pool, and explore the local towns. The picturesque sunrises and sunsets create a calm, relaxing vibe. My kids enjoy buying fruit and ordering from the local restaurants while hanging out on the beach. They always ask why we don't have those same types of offerings here in the U.S."

Anniversaries on the Big Island

Joel Drew of San Clemente's repeat destination is the Westin Hapuna Beach Resort on the Kohala Coast of the Big Island of Hawaii.

"It's a beautifully understated resort along arguably the very best beach in Hawaii," Drew wrote. "The grounds are beautiful and the ocean views are incredible. My wife and I have been returning to this location for over six years. We love sharing our anniversary dinner at sunset from here."

Snowballs and wild turkeys in Utah

"Since I was 11, I've gone almost every year with my dad to Zion National Park in Utah," wrote Joshua G. Baum of West Hollywood. "I'm 32 now, and the park has given us a lifetime of memories, from hiking the Narrows and Angel's Landing to stargazing at Big Bend and spotting wild turkeys along the trails. We still go after my dad's heart transplant, though he can't hike like he once did, and I know we'll keep returning. My favorite memory is a winter hike to Scout's Lookout when I spent the entire climb up Walter's Wiggles throwing snowballs at [my dad], and we still laugh about it today."

Culture and cocktails on Maui

"Hands down, Napili Kai Beach Resort in Maui is our family & friends all time best vacation spot, year after year," wrote Greg Vanni of Arcadia. "The resort honors the culture of the many Hawaiians who are a part of the staff by supporting the Napili Kai Foundation which, in part, provides higher education scholarships."

The resort, Vanni wrote, "sits on one of the most beautiful spots in Maui: Napili Bay. It is all about family (ohana) at Napili Kai. Our family is not unique in having three generations of family staying there. It is a tranquil, old Hawaiian experience – each building is limited to two stories. The resort features an 18-hole putting green, which hosts a putting party for all guests every Monday" with 50-cent cocktails."

Another attraction: the lush grounds, "lovingly overseen by Uncle Joe, who conducts a weekly walking tour. I can't keep track of the dozens of milestone events we have celebrated at Napili Kai."

Scribbling by a creek in Arizona

"We live in San Diego and every summer we head to Arizona," wrote David Williams of San Diego.

"Yes. Arizona. In Summer. Our not-so-secret secret spot is deep in Oak Creek Canyon. Our base camp for our adventures is a five-bedroom house overlooking Oak Creek along AZ 89-A in between Sedona and Flagstaff."

Every summer for roughly the last 20 years, Williams wrote, "we load the family, the dog, and a week's worth of provisions (with re-supplies available in Sedona and Flagstaff) and head across the blazing desert to the forest sanctuary of Oak Creek Canyon."

Each year, Williams continued, there are family excursions to local landmarks like Slide Rock State Park. And each year, adults and children alike are expected to write something in a volume known as the Creek House Book.

"We have now filled THREE complete books," Williams wrote.

Food, drink and jazz in Monterey

"My wife and I go to the Monterey Jazz Festival every year," wrote Richard Haro of Fort Collins, Co.

"With friends we usually rent a house in Carmel for the week before and do some things that have become a tradition. We go shopping in Carmel one day, we go have lunch at Nepenthe in Big Sur one day. We start our lunch with Champagne and French fries. ... We go for a sunset on Carmel Beach. ... We spend time with longtime friends that we love and basically eat and drink too much. And it all ends with a weekend of world-class jazz at the festival. We have been doing this since 1983. We plan on going for as long as we can."

The sands of Hermosa Beach

"We have gone to Hermosa Beach, California, for my entire life. That is 66 years," wrote Albro Lundy of Palos Verdes Estates. "Wherever we lived in the United States, we traveled to Hermosa Beach. My father was in the Air Force and we lived in many states, but when summer came, we got in the car and drove through [to] Hermosa Beach. The sand is the finest sand in the world and the beach goes on and on. ... It is our home away from home."

Winter at Mt. Baldy

"We head to the Mt. Baldy Lodge almost every December 23rd," wrote Jennifer Nutting of Los Angeles.

"After getting married in 2015 at the Beverly Hills courthouse, we went to the Mt. Baldy Lodge just to mark the occasion, and it became a tradition."

Each room has a fireplace, Nutting wrote, "and they decorate the rooms for the holidays. The restaurant has 2 crackling fireplaces, a few pool tables, and some good diner food. Sometimes it snows, and you wake up on December 24th to the church bells across the street playing Christmas Carols."

TRAVEL TIPS

Dreamstime / TNS

Major credit card issuers have steadily made premium credit cards more exclusive in recent years.

Premium travel cards are drifting out of reach for the average consumer – I say let them go

By ANA STAPLES
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Here's something credit card experts know but you might not: it's getting much tougher for the average person to find a great travel credit card that unlocks luxury experiences without the price tag.

Major credit card issuers have steadily made premium credit cards more exclusive in recent years. Before, they might have tried to woo you with the promise of the kind of vacations you couldn't otherwise afford. Now, they seem to be more interested in cardholders who can.

Take The Platinum Card from American Express, for example. It just announced a new annual fee of $895 – an increase from $695. The card expanded existing statement credit benefits and added new ones, to a potential added value of over $1,400. Redeeming them, however, requires quite a bit of spending and mental work (and sometimes, purchases you wouldn't have made otherwise). Yet that barely soothes the sting of facing an annual fee bill barely shy of $900. For many Americans, that's simply a no-go.

With Amex and other top issuers, the average cardholder seems to keep losing the kind of access a premium card could provide – to airport lounges and expedited airport security, to high-end concierge service, and to some of the most powerful travel protections.

The good news is you still have plenty of options to get great perks on cards that align with your regular spending. And no matter what a given credit card issuer's goals are, you still have a voice when it comes to what cards you choose to use.

Here's what you need to know about the state of premium travel cards and what you can do to still enjoy travel card perks and rewards.

What's happening to premium travel cards?

Card issuers have set their sights on the affluent consumer, the type who values and doesn't mind paying for exclusivity. But there's no "exclusivity" without excluding – and in this case, it's the average cardholder who ends up not invited to the fancy metal cardholder club.

Of course, the credit card issuers want you to think their products are as great and valuable as they've ever been, and you'd be lucky to be approved for them. But that marketing posture belies a reality that's becoming increasingly clear: the value of luxury cards is getting harder to extract, while annual fees go up.

American Express raised the annual fee on the Amex Platinum from $550 to $695 in 2021, which in retrospect seems like the start of a movement among top issuers. To be fair, Amex also added over $1,300 in new statement credit benefits at the time. But despite the potential value of those benefits, card experts and points enthusiasts likened the new perks to a "coupon book."

Among those "coupons" was a SoulCycle credit (up to $300 annually) for purchasing one SoulCycle at-home bike. That was $300 back on the purchase of a stationary bike that could cost as much as $2,500. But if you weren't interested in a SoulCycle bike, that was $300 in value left on the table. Other benefits force similar dynamics for different customers.

Unsurprisingly, such a move made plenty of people unhappy. The term "coupon book" stuck around. It doesn't exactly sound luxurious, yet more issuers followed suit, applying the same model to their premium cards.

Four years later, Chase made changes to the Chase Sapphire Reserve card. The annual fee increased from $550 to $795, with the card now offering more than $2,700 in annual value, which mostly comes from branded credits – the same way it does with the Amex Platinum.

Citi has gone this way, too: the issuer recently announced the new Citi Strata Elite Card with a $595 annual fee and $1,500 in potential annual value. The choice of brands for statement credits on this card makes it clear who the target audience is: someone interested in high-end furniture and fine art, personal training and being driven around by a chauffeur.

Now, Amex is continuing the trend it has established. At $895 per year in annual fees, you get access to new benefits like up to $300 in lululemon credits and up to $200 in Oura ring credits. Do you know what the Oura ring is? I didn't. It's a smart ring that monitors health and fitness metrics. And now it's a part of the Amex Platinum's value proposition (though the credit only applies to the purchase of a new ring, not the ongoing monthly subscription costs you'll incur to use it).

You have to hand it to them: card issuers are getting more and more creative when it comes to restricting access to value. That saves them money, without a doubt – but there's another side to this strategy.

Exclusivity is the point

It's fair to wonder if these complicated high-fee premium cards simply aren't worth the effort for most people anymore.

"An $895 annual fee simply doesn't fit into my values-based budget," says Katie Kelton, a senior credit cards writer at Bankrate and certified credit counselor. "Personally, I don't spend enough money or enjoy those luxury perks enough to make the fee worth it."

If you use these cards' high annual fees and slate of niche benefits to reverse engineer the type of customer who would actually extract full value from them, that customer might look something like this:

- Someone who doesn't have to do much budgeting to pay an annual fee north of $500
- Someone who eats at expensive restaurants and stays at luxurious resorts because that's what their lifestyle affords them – not their credit card benefits
- Someone who wants perks that provide access to something desirable (and perhaps a few hundred dollars back here and there)
- Someone who considers a $10 monthly food delivery credit might be a nice-to-have, but using it is never a priority

This cardholder is a high spender, and a card issuer wants their business. After all, a credit card might just be a gateway product, leading the cardholder to use the bank's other services.

That description certainly doesn't fit me. If that description doesn't fit you either, you might be better off with a different card. And while we can mourn the cards that allowed us to experience certain luxuries without breaking the bank (I know I do), let's also focus on financial products that can bring us value today. And there are still plenty of credit cards that can.

Your power is in your wallet

Unfortunately, there's not much individual cardholders like you and I can do to convince issuers to provide more value with their credit cards. But collectively, our power is in our wallets – specifically what cards we use.

Fill your wallet with cards that fit your lifestyle. Plenty of travel cards still offer excellent value. For instance, I've always been a huge fan of the Capital One Venture X Rewards Credit Card. This is probably the last card of its kind, offering practical premium perks at $395 per year in annual fees. You get decent airport lounge access and simple statement credits and anniversary bonuses that more than offset the fee.

The Chase Sapphire Preferred Card is an option if you're not happy with its more expensive sibling. Of course, it doesn't have a long list of premium perks, but it provides access to the same rewards system and the same valuable transfer partners. The annual fee is only $95.

Citi has an alternative too. The Citi Strata Premier Card charges an annual fee of $95 and offers $100 off a single hotel stay of $500 or more (excluding taxes and fees) when you book through CitiTravel.com.

You can also quit annual fees altogether in favor of credit card simplicity. You'll still earn rewards that can send you on a dream vacation. For example, the Capital One VentureOne Rewards Credit Card charges no annual fees and earns unlimited 1.25X miles on all purchases. You'll be able to redeem your rewards through the issuer's portal and transfer them to one of Capital One's travel partners.

As for letting card issuers know how you feel about so-called coupon books, I do so enjoy reading all the Reddit threads on the topic, but having the right card allows you to speak with your wallet too. Use credit cards that fit your spending. Don't let them dictate where to spend your money or change your habits. This is the consumer language banks understand the best.

The bottom line

Premium travel cards aren't for everyone. At least that's the message that card issuers seem to be sending by making their cards less and less accessible to the average consumer. If high annual fees and complicated benefit terms deter you, know that there are still plenty of travel cards on the market that can help you reach your travel goals. Don't change your spending to chase the value – change what belongs in your wallet.

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